Getting Your Child Ready for Reintegration

The initial reunion is often a very happy time and there will be many changes that involve the entire family. Although the reunion is incredibly special for the deployed service member and the non-deployed parent or caregiver, your baby or toddler may not remember at first who the service member is and that they can trust him or her. Remember that communicating with your baby or toddler happens mostly through caretaking that is calm, loving, sensitive to the baby’s temperament, and consistent. As plans become more solidified about when specifically the service member will be coming home, it is important to start telling your baby or toddler about the reunion, even if they don’t quite understand. Showing photos and videos of the deployed service member and talking about them can help your baby or toddler feel more safe during the reunion. Your baby or toddler has changed a lot since the deployed service member left—be sure that the service member knows that it will take time for him or her to learn about all the changes that have happened to your baby or toddler, and to be patient! It takes time for readjustment to happen.

Tips for Preparing your Child

There are many things the non-deployed parent or caregiver can do to help prepare your baby or toddler for reintegration:

1. If possible, communicate over the phone or use Skype during times when your baby or toddler can also participate. This will increase the chances that your baby or toddler will recognize the deployed service member more easily — voice is really important for babies and toddlers!

2. Remember that your baby or toddler may not recognize the service member and may become scared. This is normal, and it will take time for your baby or toddler to become comfortable around the service member again.

3. If possible, have the deployed service member bring a special gift to the reunion to give to your baby or toddler.

4. Slowly transition caregiving responsibilities to be sensitive to your child’s needs.

Your Baby/Toddler:
— Is starting to use his or her imagination
— Is starting to understand the meaning of words
— May want to be more independent (use a spoon, dress him or herself, help with chores)
— Is beginning to speak more clearly and understand commands with more than one word

Parent Tips:
— Remember that it will take time for things to feel “normal” in your family. It is best to slowly transition into new routines and caregiving roles. For example, put your baby or toddler to bed together a few nights and week for the first few weeks of reintegration, and slowly transition to letting the service member do more caregiving over time.
— Be sure to bring a familiar items to the reunion—your baby or toddler will feel more comfortable if he or she has familiar toys and clothes around.
More Information about the Homecoming

Homecoming is a big change, and change can sometimes be scary. Here are a few things to keep in mind about the reunion and reintegration:

1. **It’s OK to be nervous.** Both the service member and the non-deployed spouse or partner have experienced big changes during the deployment. It’s normal to feel a little nervous, and it is okay if things do not feel normal for a few weeks.

2. **Be realistic.** Keep an open mind to the idea that the reunion may not go exactly as planned. Everyone has been anticipating this day for a long time. It helps to keep a sense of humor if things are awkward for a little while.

3. **Accept that things will be different.** Weight may have been gained or lost, hair may be longer or shorter, and people may seem different. Be patient—the “newness” will wear off.

4. **Expect a little letdown after homecoming.** This is a very exciting time for you and your family. It is normal for everyone to feel a little drained after the reunion or after a celebration. This is okay.

5. **Avoid shopping sprees or big financial decisions.** It’s not uncommon for the returning service member to feel the need to go shopping or make a big purchase. Let things settle for a few weeks before making a big financial decision (like buying a house). Sticking to your budget can help prevent financial headaches later on!

6. **Focus on the positive.** The whole family had to adjust during deployment and now during reintegration. Be sure to express appreciation and how much you love each other!

ADAPT is gearing up for the next wave of the project. You can help us better understand reintegration in military families and have a say in future resources and services provided to reintegrating military families!

If you live in Minnesota, are a parent of a 5-12 year old, and have been deployed (or your spouse/partner has been deployed) since 2001, we want to hear from you!

To learn more about the ADAPT project, go to www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt. For more information, you can call us at 612-624-4830 or e-mail us at adapt@umn.edu.

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