



Coming Home: Reconnecting With Your Children

If you're a returning service man or woman who is also a parent, you probably carried a mental picture of how your homecoming would be. It may have included your baby uttering his or her first "Daddy" or "Mama," your toddler running towards you with outstretched arms, or your older child huddling close and begging to hear about your experiences. Such expectations may lead to disappointment. Because what sometimes happens is an initial display of happiness on the child's part followed by sulky, withdrawn or even hostile behavior.

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To understand why this happens, you must first realize that even just a few months seem like a lifetime to a child, and children instinctively adjust to new situations. They adjusted to you not being around. Now, they need time to adjust to having you around again.

Your child's reactions depend on his or her own personality, but there are several things that all returning parents should keep in mind:

Tell your children how much you missed them and how happy you are to see them again. It may seem like they should know this, but they need to hear it from you.

Praise them for helping out while you were gone. Children are unsure what to expect from a returning parent. For example, they may fear they will be punished for six months' of bad behavior. They may also fear you'll "abandon" them again. Put their minds at rest.

Remember that change is just as stressful for children as it is for adults – probably more so because they have so little experience coping with it. Sometimes they act out. Remember this before you punish your child.

Don't expect the same behavior. He or she has grown physically, emotionally and socially. This is not the same child as when you left.

Try to avoid power struggles with both your spouse and your children. Take it slowly as you, and they, readjust to your presence.

Be patient. This period of transition will last several weeks – and it can be awkward. You can ease this by reviewing schoolwork, looking at family photos or asking your children about their activities.

Allow them to express their feelings. Don't try to force positive responses. Preschoolers may act coolly toward you. Acting aggressively or disinterested is their way of showing their hurt and anger at you for leaving. This behavior, though unsettling, usually doesn't last long. Just tell them how much you missed them, and how you're looking forward to hearing about the things they did while you were away.

You can use the same strategies with older children. Express interest in their schoolwork and social activities, and make them feel a part of your life by telling them about your own experiences. Older children usually understand war and deployment a little better than younger ones, but this doesn't mean they didn't miss you. Tell them how much you missed them.

Of Special Importance to New Fathers

If you were away for the birth or the first year of your baby's life, you'll be coming home

to a whole new family. Be aware of the changes:

You may feel jealous of the attention given to the infant or guilty for being away during the pregnancy and birth. Accept two facts: the separation was inevitable, and the infant's needs demand attention. Take an active role in caring for the child as soon as possible.

Baby's needs come first, and they're expensive. Be prepared for a much tighter budget.

Other children may feel lost with all the changes and need help coping. Make sure to spend quality time with your older children.

Of Special Importance to Single Parents

In addition to the joy and stress all parents feel when returning to children after a long absence, single parents may feel particularly anxious about the bond formed by the child and the temporary caregiver. How will it affect their relationship with both of them? Here are some tips:

Communicate openly and frequently with both the caregiver and the child.

Involve the caregiver in the transition. Forcing the child to suddenly separate can be just as traumatic as when you left.

Ask how things were done while you were gone. It will help you plan how to ease your child back into your rules and schedules.

Ask your child about his or her feelings regarding your "new" relationship and how life at home should be. The changes in caregivers and living arrangements may make children feel as though they have no control over their lives. Assure them that you will be a family again.

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) has several resources available to help you and your family deal with the homecoming. For more information, contact your local Mental Health Association, or NMHA at www.nmha.org or 800-969-NMHA (6642).

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National Mental Health Association

2001 N. Beauregard Street, 12th Floor

Alexandria, VA 22311

Phone 703/684-7722

Fax 703/684-5968

[Mental Health Resource Center](#) 800/969-NMHA

TTY Line 800/433-5959



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