

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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COMING HOME: ADJUSTMENTS FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

Military families look forward to being together after a long deployment with many mixed emotions. Each family member will have different expectations. Every family situation is different. But, it is important to remember the needs and feelings of the returning family member, the adult at home and the children.

Understanding the Returning Family Member

- Military deployments, especially in a combat zone, can significantly change an individual's life.
- The deployment involved the loss of many comforts that people back home take for granted: contact with family, comfortable living conditions, a variety of good food, time to relax, etc.
- The deployment involved hard work and enormous responsibility. If in a war zone, there was the constant threat of loss of life or injury. The family member may have witnessed injuries, deaths and destruction.
- What sustains military personnel on a dangerous deployment is devotion to duty, a close connection with fellow soldiers and the desire to return to the comforts of home, family and community.
- The returning family member may seem preoccupied with the experience of their deployment. They may be unable to talk about it or may excessively talk about it.
- The returning family member may have suffered physical or emotional injury or disability.
- The returning family member may expect extra attention and support for some time after their return.
- The returning family member may have serious concerns about their financial or employment future.

Understanding the Adult that Stayed at Home

- Life has gone on and the adult at home has had to keep the family moving forward during the deployment. They may have had to take over many functions normally performed by the deployed family member.
- Often the adult at home has handled many small and not so small crises. These problems are old news at home but may be big surprises for the returning family member.
- The adult at home may expect extra attention and credit regarding the performance during the deployment. They also may expect the returning family members to automatically accept the family as it now exists and begin to perform a role with which they are uncomfortable or unfamiliar.

Understanding the Children

- Children generally are excited about a reunion with their returning parent. However, the excitement of the reunion is stressful for children. Children may also be anxious and uncertain about the reunion.

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- Children's responses are influenced by their developmental level. Toddlers may not remember the parent well and act shy or strange around them. School age children may not understand the returning parent's need to take care of themselves and to spend time with their spouse. Teenagers may seem distant as they continue their activities with friends.
- Children may need a period of time to warm up and readjust to the returning parent. This should not be misinterpreted or taken personally.

Understanding the Family

- Couples may find the deployment has strained their relationship. Time and negotiation will help the couple work toward a new loving relationship.
- Family problems that existed before the deployment frequently reappear after the deployment.
- Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles may have provided support and service to the family during the deployment. They may have difficulty redefining their role with the family.

Give Everyone Time

- All family members will need time to adjust to the changes that accompany the return of the deployed family member.
- Open discussion of expectations prior to the return home are helpful if they are possible.
- Families should utilize the help offered by the military and other organizations to readjust to the reunion.
- Most families will change. Children have been born or have grown. An adult at home may have become more independent. The returning family member had a life changing experience. The goal is to form a healthy, new life together.

Reunion of a military family after a long deployment is a cause for celebration. Some patience and understanding will go a long way to help the whole family successfully reunite with a minimum of problems. While most families cope successfully with the stress of the deployment and reunion, problems can develop. If significant problems develop, the family should seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

For additional information, see *Facts for Families*: #88 Families in the Military, #77 Grandparents Raising Children, #24 Know When to Seek Help for Your Child, and #25 Know How to Seek Help for Your Child.

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