



Fact Sheet

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Families: the strongest link

Welcome Back! Here's What's Been Happening While You Were Gone!

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Whether you are gone for two days, two weeks, or two months, things will change while you are gone. If you travel as a regular part of your job, your family may learn to adapt to your absence through experience. If travel is not frequent but occasional in your line of work, you may want to think ahead as to how things will be handled and have a plan of action. In either case, military research shares with us some tips to make the separations and transitions easier for our children and our spouses.

Impact on Children

A child's response to separation will depend greatly on how the parent left at home deals with the separation, his or her coping skills, the anticipation of the reunion, and the general satisfaction with the marriage. Children sometimes feel anger, anxiety, and fear as well as a feeling that the parent will never return. If these feelings are dealt with in a positive manner, the child will soon find that this is a "normal" part of their childhood routine. The length of the separation is exaggerated for children. Time stretches out forever. A weekend seems never ending, a month or six months is almost unimaginable. Marking days off on a calendar until the family is reunited might be helpful in putting time into perspective for children.

Change in Children

Children change more in a shorter period of time than do adults. The tiny infant may now sit, crawl, laugh, and

recognize family members. This may mean that the parent who has been gone may not be recognized and a period of adjustment needs to be allowed. An investment in a good child development book might help both parents understand the emotional, social, and physical changes that they can expect from young children.

If your child is a toddler, his or her behavior may change from time to time. He or she may accept your return with no problem one week and be afraid of you the next. The child may become shy or clingy to either parent. Behavior may regress to earlier stages like baby talk, wanting a bottle, or forgetting toilet training. Encourage your child toward more positive behavior and avoid punishment for this attention-getting behavior. Reward them with encouragement and hugs when they achieve milestones.

Preschoolers may feel guilty for making the parent go away. They may need additional warming up time and/or to act out in anger. Remember to reassure them and keep the rules and routines as much the same as possible.

School-age children may feel guilty that they didn't do enough or weren't good enough and may dread the parent's return. They may feel they get more attention when the parent is gone and thus resent the return. Older children can change, too. Interests, hobbies, friends, and activities can begin and end while one parent is away. They too may feel guilty because of events that happened during the separation and the possibility of new rules and responsibilities upon the return.

Suggestions for the Returning Parent

Before the reunion, think about what your expectations are for your children. How do you think they will act when you return? Here are a few tips to make the transition a little easier.

- Go slow, observe, and be flexible—but not a pushover. Be realistic in your expectations and keep in touch during the separation so that you are aware of changes in behavior and events. Take time with each member of the family to let them know that they are special and appreciated. Realize that with each departure and return, it will get a little easier for children to accept the separation and anticipated reunion. Develop a special family tradition that could be done at this time, like a favorite meal, a time to look at pictures or school papers, a night of board games, or whatever may be age-appropriate for your family to look forward to.
- Take it easy on the children, especially with the discipline. The rules and responsibilities may have altered during your absence. Have a family meeting and talk about why rules are needed and what the consequences will be for breaking them. Make a special effort to be united with your spouse on this issue so that there are not frequent changes or exceptions from the family rules.
- Don't send the children away so that the two of you can have an intimate reunion. It is important to reaffirm your bond with the children also. When letters or communication are sent home during your absence, make sure to write to everyone. Include separate cards or notes to each child so they are reassured of your relationship.
- Take personal time with each child soon after your return. Develop good communication with them and let them know how proud you are of their accomplishments and the help they gave during the time of separation.

Getting Reacquainted

Many families find that the reunion period is the most challenging part of the whole experience. It is a complex process of adjustment and getting reacquainted for each member of the family. When one parent is gone, the remaining parent assumes greater responsibility for daily life. The choices, decisions, and actions taken are made with their best judgment. What is done while one parent is absent needs to

be accepted and not criticized. If disagreement occurs, talk about both views and make plans for how it might be handled if it arises again. The shift of power during the separation and reunion is difficult for both parents. As much as possible, keep communication lines open and honest during the absence so that there are no "surprises" when the parent returns.

Research on children in military families reveals that if the mother is positive about the separation and handling the family issues, the children do best. Positive coping is associated with positive child outcomes. Positive family adaptation then leads to an increase in family satisfaction. Allow yourself time to readjust and reestablish individual roles. Suggested time for family readjustment in military life is four to eight weeks. Your separation may not be as frequent or as lengthy as the military, but realize that time is needed to regain your individual lives.

Plan ahead for the reunion so that the expectations are not so high that there is disappointment. Involve the whole family and save reunions with extended family and friends for a day or two later. Keeping communication lines open seem to be a true key in successful reunions.

Remember that separation is a stressful time for everyone in the family. Reinforcing the positive and working through the difficult issues makes every separation a little easier for everyone. One of the most important indicators of success in family relationships is the amount of time devoted to the family. Make it a priority to invest time in yours before the separation so that the transition and reunion go more smoothly.

References

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