

# *Readiness and Deployment Support Training*

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RETURN AND REUNION HOMECOMING HANDBOOK:  
PARENTS AND KIDS



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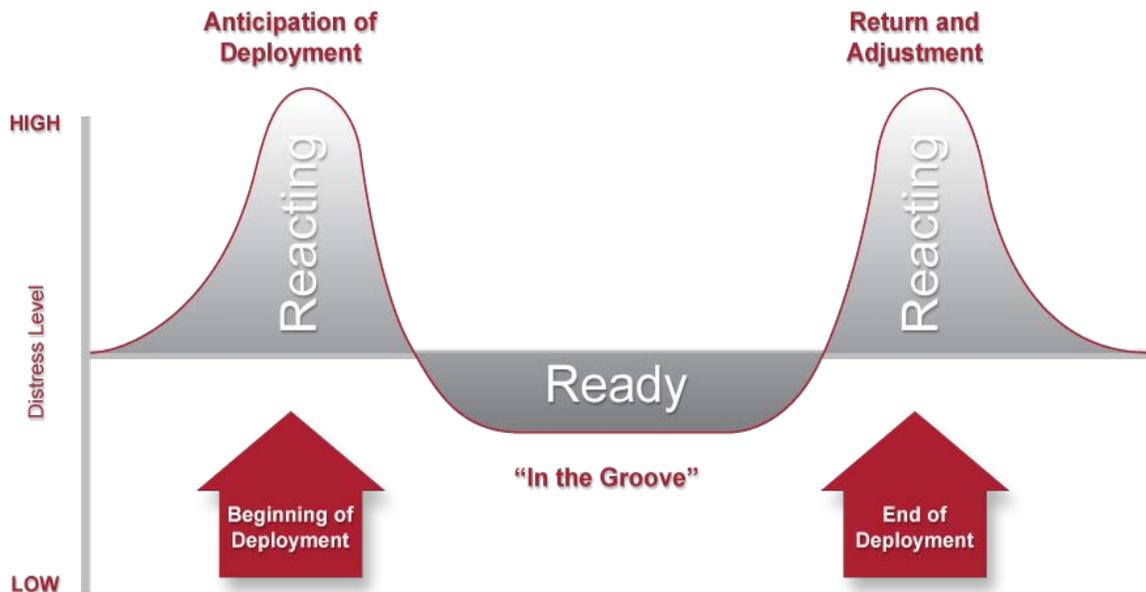


## Introduction

Homecoming is an exciting time because it offers a fresh start for Marines and their families. It's important to remember that homecoming is a process. The process starts even before the unit returns, continues through the reunion celebration and may take weeks or months to return to your new normal, or post-deployment, life.

Homecoming often starts with a celebration event sometimes referred to as *Return and Reunion*, or *Homecoming*. After the celebration, *Reintegration*, or the work of reuniting as a family, begins. For some families, this process goes smoothly and quickly; for others, reintegration can be a bumpy road.

There are many positive things that may have occurred during deployment for children. They have likely grown physically, emotionally, educationally and developmentally. Now children have the excitement of looking forward to homecoming. However, there may have been some stressful adjustments during the deployment, and with the anticipation of homecoming and reintegration, stress can become elevated again as modeled in the Emotional Cycle of Deployment. Please remember that this swing in behavior is normal.



**Emotional Cycle of Deployment**

## Celebrating Homecoming

It is that time when everything seems to be on the right track and you are comfortably “in the groove” of the Emotional Cycle of Deployment: your infant sleeps through the night, your preschooler ties his own shoes, your teenager takes out the trash without being asked and now the anticipation of homecoming has kicked in and we move forward into reaction mode. It is time to start thinking about homecoming and celebrating accomplishments.

List proud mommy and daddy moments that you have experienced during the deployment to share and/or reflect upon when your Marine returns home.

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Celebrating homecoming should focus on being together and being thankful for your Marine’s safe return and a job well done by the whole family. Celebrate the positive learning experiences and growth of your children. Homecoming is an exciting time, but it may also be confusing for kids. Remember, each child is unique and each child may react differently to homecoming.

The following tips that have been recommended by service members, families and helping professionals for celebrating homecoming:

- Keep homecoming day plans as simple as possible.
- Focus on core family activities – take it slow.
- Involve your children in the preparation for homecoming.
- Resist the urge to have a “change of command” at the doorstep.
- Do not make any changes to the family schedule for the first few days.
- Be patient. Family life will typically settle within a couple of days.
- Take some time to get reacquainted with your partner and encourage him or her to do the same with the children.
- Plan simple activities to reconnect such as a family dinner, game night, bike riding together, visiting a museum, or the local zoo, and/or a movie night at home.

Homecoming can also be stressful, but exercise can help in dealing with that stress. Research shows that exercise helps release tension, improve your mood, and help you feel more energetic. Exercise doesn't mean that you have to hit the gym or add a vigorous regimen to your routine. Families can exercise together by doing activities such as bike riding, walking, going to the zoo, walking around museums, or playing sports games together.

What are your family's plans?

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How can your children help you with your family's plans?

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- Make plans for homecoming, but keep them simple and realistic as it is likely that you, your Marine, and your children will be more tired than you expect.
- If family is coming in from out of the area, ensure base access.
- Contact your Family Readiness Officer for assistance.
- Stay flexible as delays may occur.
- Plan for how you will spend your first day.
- Will there be a lot of people celebrating homecoming with you, or do you prefer a quiet homecoming?

Your Marine may be traveling from another country and through several time zones. Many find it hard to sleep prior to homecoming. With all the excitement

and preparations, fatigue is a common homecoming reaction for everyone, including children.

Many Marines say they experience culture shock at homecoming. They are surprised by the bright colors, the climate, and the smells. This shock and fatigue can make decision-making hard for them. They likely will be pleased with a simple homecoming – a home-cooked meal, a hot shower, and being with you and the children.

If you have out-of-town guests or children, and are just looking for something to do during your Marine's leave, contact your local installation Information Tickets and Travel (ITT) office for discounted tickets to many events in your area, or the local Chamber of Commerce to get ideas of inexpensive things to do such as:

- Concerts
- Festivals
- Museums
- Bowling
- Dinner
- Zoo
- Parks
- Botanical gardens
- Beaches
- Historic houses
- Picnic areas
- Movies

## Challenges and Solutions

A parent may encounter many challenges during deployment and then again when reunion time nears. Like parents, many children experience excitement and fear during this much-anticipated time. Many questions will come up. For example, when anticipation and planning for the celebration of homecoming: “How has Mom or Dad changed?” And “Will he/she know who I am?”

Children’s responses are influenced by their developmental level. Toddlers, (1-3 years old), may not remember the parent well and act shy or strange around them, or they may regress in potty training. Preschoolers, (3-5 years old), may want to test the limits and see if the same family rules still apply. School-age children, (5-12 years old), may not understand the returning parents’ need to take care of themselves and spend time with their spouse. They may try to monopolize the returning parent’s attention, or may be shy or withdrawn around them. Teenagers, (13-18 years old), may seem distant as they continue their activities with friends. Challenges that you may see with your children during reintegration may be behavioral, emotional, and educational.

Children will have changed physically and emotionally during the duration of the deployment. Some children might encounter some challenges when anticipating the return of the deployed parent and also during reintegration.

**Behavioral challenges:** If behavioral challenges have led you to a school counselor, psychologist, and/or social worker prior to your Marine’s return, make sure that the intervention continues and that the deployed parent is included upon their return.

**Emotional challenges:** Children’s emotional needs and challenges can vary. To ease these challenges during the reintegration phase of deployment, it is important to maintain the child’s routines at home and at school. If the daily routines have changed, be sure to inform the deployed parent before he/she arrives, if possible. This will help prepare the deployed parent and child for the homecoming.

**Educational and developmental challenges:** To ensure continuous support with the schools, it is important that the deployed parent be informed of any educational changes or adaptations preferably before the return and reunion, if possible. Parents may wish to contact their installation School Liaison Officer. Most installations have a School Liaison Officer to assist parents in interacting with local schools in responding to education transition issues). Contact your FRO for more information.

Preparing for homecoming can be a busy time, but take the time to list behavioral, emotional, and/or educational challenges that may have happened during the deployment and share them with your Marine. This will give you and your Marine an opportunity to reflect on your children’s growth and successes despite the challenges your children faced during the deployment.

Behavioral challenges:

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Emotional challenges:

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Educational and developmental challenges:

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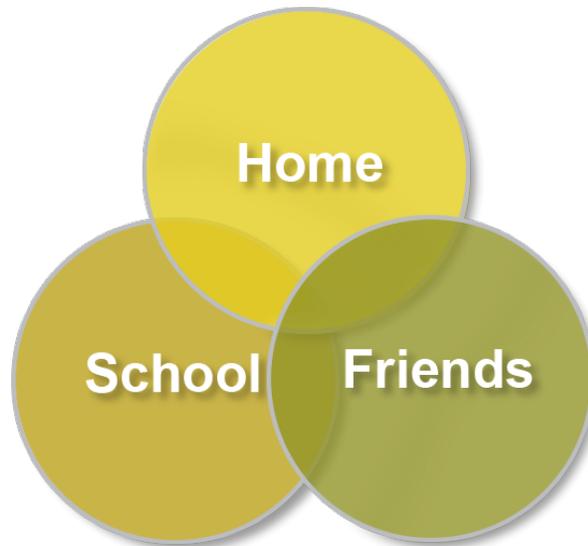
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Most children will manage and thrive during the reintegration process with their returning parent, but how do you know if your child is struggling and may need help?

First, it is not unreasonable to expect some initial struggling and adjusting for the entire family. Most families take about four to six weeks to reintegrate. If after six weeks your child still has difficulty adjusting, and you notice they *continue* to exhibit the behaviors just discussed, (i.e., acting shy, regressing in potty training, continuing to test the limits, monopolize the returning parent's attention, acting withdrawn, etc.), it may be time to ask for assistance from a trained professional.

Imagine your child's life as intersecting circles, consisting of three primary areas:

1. Home
2. School (child care)
3. Friends/community



**Child's Emotional Health Diagram**

A child who has problems in two or more of these areas may be indications of an emotional imbalance and may need help. A child experiencing significant problems in one of those areas would certainly benefit from getting help.

You and your child may benefit from talking with a school counselor, a chaplain, pediatrician or Military OneSource to prevent problems from escalating. Also, through Military OneSource, you can access up to 12 in-person or telephone non-medical counseling sessions per issue with a licensed counselor.

This service is available through Military OneSource for adults and children. Children may vary in their progress regarding the reintegration process as individuals, and it is important to reach out for extra help if they are struggling with this process.

The MCCS New Parent Support Program provides support services to military families with children up to five years old, including newborns. Services include classes for expectant and new parents that offer hands on information, referrals to help parents find necessary military and community services, playgroups, and home visits (<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/npsp/index.cfm>).

## Communication

Children communicate in many ways. Art therapy, drawing, or coloring can be an effective means of a child's ability to identify with their feelings. Children tend to use art to help them communicate feelings of separation, fear, happiness, excitement and even feelings associated with a traumatic event such as military conflicts.

Symptoms and reactions of feelings and stress that children may exhibit are:

- Headaches
- Low energy
- Moodiness
- Irritability
- Stomach problems
- Inability to sleep
- Overreacting to events
- Lashing out
- Yelling

How does your child communicate their feelings?

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It is important to open the lines of communication with our children. One way to get a child of any age to talk is to ask the right question. A closed-ended question usually calls for a yes or no answer and may cut off conversation. Some closed-ended questions ask the child to agree with the adult. "Don't you think that you should put that away?" These types of questions seem like an accusation. On the other hand, open-ended questions usually begin with where, when, what, who, which, or how.

Open-ended questions tend to keep conversation going because they ask for information the parents want to know in order to learn more about a child's opinion, activity, or feeling. A good example of an open-ended question is "What did you like about school today?"

If you are having difficulty thinking of questions for your child, these might help get your conversation started:

- What is your favorite book and why?
- If you were packing a picnic lunch, what would you pack?
- What makes you happy?
- What do you do when your stomach feels funny because you are nervous?

## Teen discussions may include such topics as:

- At what age should you be able to get your driver's license?
- What type of music makes you happy?
- How often do you text message and how many do you receive in one day?
- Should there be a limit for adults and children on telephone calls or chat rooms? Social networking sites? Video games? Why?
- Is it okay to lie? Why?
- There are great meals out there — which are your favorites?

What are some other open-ended questions that might help to get conversations started with your children?

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When talking about the return of the deployed parent, remember to take time to talk and listen.

- Tell your children what is happening and that their deployed parent should be returning home soon. This will give them time to think about the parent's return, begin to accept it, and get used to their feelings about the reunion.
- Be available as much as possible whenever your child(ren) wants to talk.
- Be patient when your child repeatedly asks the same questions.
- Treat all of your children's questions with respect and seriousness.

Remember that just like getting ready and adjusting to deployment is a process, so is return, reunion, and reintegration. For some families, this process goes smoothly and quickly; for others, reintegration can be a bumpy road.

Encourage your children to share their excitement about their parent's homecoming and also reassure them that it is OK to be curious — maybe even worried — about what it will be like when their parent returns home.

Help your children share the changes at home and things that they have learned or accomplished with their returning parent. Suggest that children collect pictures,

homework, favorite books or movies, report cards, awards, special music, artwork to show and talk about with their parent when he/she returns.

Prepare children for reintegration by discussing how things within the household may be different when their parent returns and prepare them as much as possible for how things might be different. Be sure to include positive changes that may occur, such as reading together as a family before bedtime, continuing your family game night, or maybe going to a favorite restaurant once a month.

Encourage your children to talk about their feelings. You can help your children express their feelings through talk, play, drawings, poems, songs, etc. Be aware of your own emotional reactions around your children and do not rely on them for emotional support.

Remind your children to be patient and celebrate the changes and learning experiences that have occurred while their parent has been away. Talk about ways that your family will patiently adjust to being together again as a family.

### **Talking About Combat**

Talking to kids about combat and combat trauma can be challenging. Often, when parents return from war, they may wonder if and how to explain their experiences to their children. Questions from kids can be tough, (i.e., “*What is war?*”, “*Did you kill anyone?*”). It’s important not to shy away from answering them. As their parent, you are their best source of information to help ease their fears, and clarify any misconceptions.

The types of questions children may ask and the types of responses you provide will depend largely on their age, personality, and individual concerns and fears. Here are some things to consider when preparing to talk to your child(ren):

### **Anticipate and write down a list of questions your child may ask you**

These may include:

- “What is war?”
- “Why are we at war?”
- “Why did you go to war?”
- “Will the war come here?”
- “Will I have to go to war?”
- “Will you have to go back to war?”
- “Did you know anyone who was killed?”
- “What happens when the war ends?”

## Let the child talk first

Find out what your child knows about war, what is happening in the news, and how they feel about you being in combat. You may be surprised at how much your child knows, or you may be alarmed at any conclusions they may have drawn from friends, media, etc. Allowing the child to take the lead will help you give them the most appropriate information and reassurance. If your child avoids talking about war, it doesn't mean they aren't thinking about it. Sometimes younger children are overwhelmed by something and are unable to express themselves verbally. They may act out their thoughts and feelings in other ways. Look for other ways of interacting and communicating. This could include pretend play, playing with toys, watching a movie, or reading a book together.

## Ask plenty of questions

These question may include:

- “What are you scared of?”
- “What bothers you the most about me being away at war?”
- “Do you feel angry?”
- “What worries you about daddy/mommy being in a war?”

Keep in mind, young children are not able to draw abstract conclusions about complicated events like war. Your child may worry that if you or another family member takes a local trip somewhere you won't come back. Having your child talk about their fears can help you address any misconceptions. One way you can help young children who have difficulty identifying or labeling their feelings is to tell a story that describes some of the emotions your child may be experiencing. The story can be about another person, about a hypothetical person, or about yourself (in the past or the present).

## Acknowledge your child's feelings

Instead of saying things such as “Don't feel sad,” you might try, “It seems like you feel sad. I feel that way, too.” Remember to reassure your child that what happened when you were gone was scary and confusing. Validate other feelings and emotions they may have had when you were away.

## Adjust your response to the age of the child

Any information about combat or combat trauma needs to be presented in an age-appropriate manner. Remember that younger children tend to look for simple answers. They have a tendency to confuse facts with their fantasies and fears. When explaining the actions of war, you may need to make the distinction between actions such as bombing, sniper attacks, or guerrilla warfare. School-age children are concerned about fairness and punishment. They may compare scary

movie scenes with news footage and magnify news events. Teens consider issues of ethics and politics and may feel a need to take a stand or take action.

### **Don't overwhelm the child with too much information**

Focus on giving your child small doses of information at a time, and let them lead the conversation. Consider making a list of the information or topics you wish to share with your child, then rank them in order of how upsetting or threatening you think they may be to the child. Start with the topics you judge to be the *least* upsetting. Watch for signs that you've satisfied the child's questions, and they are ready to stop talking about it for the time being. If your child responds well, ask the child if they would like to talk about war-related issues again and if so, when. The next time you talk, choose the next least-threatening topic on the list.

### **Limit exposure to TV and other media**

This is especially important for younger children, who may associate the violence in the media with what was happening to you when you were deployed in combat. If you have an older school-age child, you may want to watch the news together and talk about what you're seeing, and how it relates to what you experienced.

### **Watch for changes in your child's behavior**

Being a little upset is to be expected, however, signs such as being more aggressive in school, waking up frequently in the middle of the night, being clingier at home, or crying more often, may indicate your child is experiencing stress. Stop all discussions about war and other fearful topics. Your child may need extra reassurance and support from you. If your child seems to be having trouble coping, seek assistance from your pediatrician, or professional child counselors.

### **Be clear about your motivation**

Remember that the purpose of these talks is to help the child, not the parent. If a particular topic is being discussed because the parent feels emotionally overwhelmed by it and needs to release some emotional overload, they should be sharing those thoughts and feelings with a trained professional or another adult, and not a child.

## About Your Child

A Marine's homecoming is a major change for the children in the household. They have grown physically, emotionally, and socially during the deployment. Children are not as skilled at coping with their stress because they have little life experience. As a result, they may become firmly attached to the returning parent wanting their undivided attention or they may seem distant, withdrawn, attached to their primary caregiver during the deployment, or they may seem like they don't care. There will be a readjustment period, which is typically four to six weeks for the entire family.

You can greatly enhance your family's reunion by developing realistic, age-appropriate expectations of how your child will respond to the Marine's return. Children are developing individuals who change rapidly in their thoughts and behaviors.

Homecoming is an exciting time, but it may also be confusing for kids. The following reactions have been observed in children when a parent returns from deployment. Remember, each child is unique. Your child may react differently.

The chart on the following pages lists what you and your returning Marine can expect regarding children's behaviors and reactions and ways your Marine can help ease reintegration for the various age groups during return, reunion, and reintegration.

	<b>What to Expect</b>	<b>Ways to Help</b>
<p>Infants (Birth to 1 year – includes babies born during the deployment)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be shy and clingy.</li> <li>• May not recognize or remember the returning parent.</li> <li>• May cry when held by the Marine, pull away, fuss, and cling to the person who was the primary caregiver during the deployment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not force hugs or play.</li> <li>• Give them time to warm up; they'll be curious and seek out the returning parent.</li> <li>• Interact, care for, bathe, change diapers, feed, and play with the infant; don't force holding, hugging, or kissing; give them time to warm up.</li> <li>• Be gentle and fun.</li> <li>• Be patient and let your baby's reactions be your guide in terms of what pace to proceed in getting acquainted.</li> </ul>
<p>Toddlers (1-3 years)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have temper tantrums.</li> <li>• May regress with toilet training, sleeping in their own bed, thumb sucking, etc.</li> <li>• May cry, be shy and clingy with the person who was the primary caregiver during the deployment.</li> <li>• May not recognize or remember the returning parent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not force hugs or play.</li> <li>• Give them time and space to warm up; they'll be curious and seek out the returning parent.</li> <li>• Sit or kneel at their level and talk with him/her.</li> <li>• Snuggle with your partner; your child will soon be in the middle.</li> <li>• Do daily child-related tasks (change diapers, feed, help at the potty chair, etc.)</li> <li>• Gently offer to play, but do not force the issue.</li> <li>• Relax and be patient.</li> </ul>

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	<b>What to Expect</b>	<b>Ways to Help</b>
Preschoolers (4-5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will recognize returning parent but may need warm-up time.</li> <li>• May need proof that returning parent is real (poking, playing with eye glasses, etc.)</li> <li>• May misbehave to get attention.</li> <li>• May be demanding.</li> <li>• May express intense anger as a way of keeping the returning parent at a distance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to what they tell you.</li> <li>• Accept their feelings. Find out what new things they are interested in (toys, games, TV shows, etc.) and give them some undivided attention.</li> <li>• Ask them to wait if they are using attention-getting techniques.</li> <li>• Play together.</li> <li>• Do daily child-related tasks (put down for nap, take to preschool, help pick up toys, etc.)</li> <li>• Reinforce your love for your child, even when you don't love the behavior.</li> <li>• Relax and be patient.</li> <li>• Interact and play with children, don't force holding, hugging, or kissing; give them time to warm up.</li> <li>• Be gentle and fun; sit at their level.</li> <li>• Listen; accept their feelings.</li> <li>• Reinforce your love; ask about interests, assure them absence was not about them.</li> <li>• Plan activities that engage children and not overwhelm the homecoming parent, i.e. park, movie night.</li> <li>• Focus on rewarding positive behaviors.</li> <li>• Support the other parent's enforcement of family rules but be careful about too quickly stepping into an authoritative role.</li> </ul>

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	<b>What to Expect</b>	<b>Ways to Help</b>
School-age (5-12 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May run to greet the returning parent.</li> <li>• May initially be quiet and reserved.</li> <li>• Eager to show off the returning parent at school or to friends.</li> <li>• May feel guilty that they did not behave good enough while the returning parent was away.</li> <li>• May dread parent's return, fearing they will be disciplined for any wrongs committed during the deployment.</li> <li>• May be shy at first or withdrawn around the newly returned parent.</li> <li>• May talk nonstop to bring the returning parent up to date.</li> <li>• May boast about the returning parent and the Marine Corps.</li> <li>• Eager to show off scrapbooks, hobby items, or school projects when the Marine gets home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge and appreciate what they've accomplished during the deployment.</li> <li>• Spend time reviewing schoolwork, pictures, family scrapbooks, etc.</li> <li>• Try not to criticize past negative behaviors (poor grades at school, picking on their sibling, etc.)</li> <li>• Play and exercise together.</li> <li>• Do chores together.</li> <li>• Make time to hear about child's daily activities.</li> <li>• Talk and listen to child.</li> <li>• Be genuine.</li> <li>• Ask who, what, where, when questions.</li> <li>• Read stories to them slightly above their level.</li> <li>• Set the example; speak your mind.</li> <li>• Listen empathetically; ask child to communicate what is wrong.</li> <li>• Listen attentively, calmly and with interest, patience, openness and caring.</li> <li>• Do not interrupt.</li> <li>• Keep it simple (use short phrases).</li> <li>• Reach out and touch your child – A hand on your child's shoulder, a hug around their waist, conveys a sense of attention and helps to convey love and supports your words.</li> <li>• Have a friendly interest in what the child has done during the time of deployment and praise their efforts and accomplishments.</li> </ul>

	<b>What to Expect</b>	<b>Ways to Help</b>
Teens (13-18 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May exhibit excitement if parent/teen relationship was strong prior to deployment.</li> <li>• May display mixed emotions.</li> <li>• May be reserved to publicly expressing their emotions.</li> <li>• May feel guilty for not living up to standards.</li> <li>• May be concerned about rules and responsibilities changing.</li> <li>• May have changed physically.</li> <li>• May feel too old to meet and greet the returning parent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen with undivided attention.</li> <li>• Respect their privacy and friends.</li> <li>• Encourage them to share what has happened in their personal life – be careful not to criticize.</li> <li>• Share your experiences with them as appropriate.</li> <li>• Ask them for updates about current trends, music fashion, etc.</li> <li>• Do not be judgmental.</li> <li>• Respect privacy and friends.</li> <li>• Do not tease about fashion, music, etc.</li> <li>• Let them help plan family activities.</li> <li>• Try to discuss any feelings the child has prior to homecoming, if possible.</li> </ul>

Parents who have babies born during a deployment may also find it helpful to reflect on what they have been able to share regarding the pregnancy, birth and developments up to this point with their Marine. If you have created a baby book, have pictures, and/or made videos, sit down as a family to reflect, even if your Marine has already seen these items. Involve your Marine with the baby's scheduled activities and allow time for a bond to be formed between your Marine and your new baby.

**Tips for the entire family:**

- Take it slow.
- Don't force a reunion.
- Concentrate on the positive.

If you are experienced with homecomings, consider what has worked and not worked during past return, reunion, and reintegration.

If you are experiencing homecoming for the first time, remember to be patient and talk with your military friends about what has worked and not worked for their families in the past.

Renegotiating roles is a balance between you and your Marine. Both people will need to make adjustments to successfully reintegrate as a family. This is especially important for your children.

When renegotiating roles, it is important to:

- Allow everyone in the family time for everyone to adjust.
- Make changes gradually to such things as household duties, budgeting, and parenting roles.
- Move forward at a realistic pace, creating “honey-do” lists with a few items at a time.
- Manage and adhere to realistic expectations regarding reintegration.
- Support each other in parenting roles.
- Focus on the positive changes and growth in each other and your children, such as acquiring new skills, learning new things, and gaining independence.
- Show appreciation and need for each other.
- When renegotiating roles, it is important to be patient, flexible and openly communicate. Remember to resist the urge to have a “change of command” at the doorstep.

### ***Active-Duty Single Parent***

If you are a single parent, you may experience some unique concerns about reuniting with your children. Consider:

- If you are a custodial parent, then your child has been living with someone else for several months. If this has been a satisfying relationship, the bond between this caregiver and your child may be strong. Your child’s increased loyalty to his or her caregiver may be painful for you. You may initially feel unneeded or even jealous. Remember that this attachment is positive. It allowed your child to grow and thrive.
- Involve the caretaker in the transition. Forcing your child, especially a young one, to suddenly separate can be traumatic. Your child may need to maintain his or her ties to the caregiver.
- Recognize that you and your child will need to adapt to living with each other again. Give yourself and your child adequate time to “shift gears.” The adjustment period, which may take several weeks, can sometimes be awkward.
- Communicate with both the caregiver and your child. Learn about how things were done while you were gone.

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- Ask your children about their feelings. Allow them to have input in decisions. Children need to feel that they have some control over their lives.
- Your child has had different rules and procedures. Take time to compare these rules to the rules of your home. As you're doing this, seek your child's input. Children need to feel included in the process of re-establishing the structure and spirit of your home environment. This will help your child ease back into your rules and schedule.

If you are a non-custodial parent, your child's living situation was probably not affected by your deployment. Your visits with your child have, however, been curtailed. As you re-establish these visits, remember that both you and your child have grown, and you will need to take time to get reacquainted.

## Homecoming

Homecoming is a process. It often starts with a celebration event sometimes referred to as *Return and Reunion*, or *Homecoming*. After the celebration, *Reintegration*, or the work of reuniting as a family, begins. For some families, this process goes smoothly and quickly; for others, reintegration can be a bumpy road.

### **Coming Home to a New Baby**

When Dad's away at the time of birth, or for a good part of baby's first year, special efforts need to be made to capture and share the events that occur during these important days.

The birth of a baby is a profound experience for all parents. But when parents are apart at the time of birth, both mother and father should consider the feelings each may be experiencing. It is important to communicate often during this period to:

- Share the birth experience.
- Share feelings about accepting the new role of parenthood.
- Share information about the baby's growth and development.
- Prepare for "family life."
- Reaffirm your commitment to each other.

### **How Might Dad Be Feeling?**

Dads who are absent during the baby's first year experience many different emotions:

- *First blush of pride*  
Most dads are proud and happy to announce the birth of their child to family and friends. It is also a time for passing out cigars, congratulations and relief.
- *Apprehension*  
Fatherhood is a serious responsibility. Many new fathers are anxious as they approach the new roles, demands and challenges that lie ahead. Encouragement from others is helpful.
- *Guilt and anger*  
Both of these feelings gnaw at many new fathers who are separated from their wives and new babies. But what all new parents must do when they are apart at the time of birth is to accept the fact of separation and share as much of the new and exciting parenting experiences as possible through frequent communication.
- *Curiosity*  
Every father wants to know about his baby's looks, likes, size and

abilities. During times of deployment, pictures, video and descriptions are a warm and welcomed opportunity for Dad to get to know the newest family member.

- *Concern about family's care*  
Each new father wants to be assured that mother and baby are both safe and well cared for. Advance planning to ensure that someone (such as family, friends or neighbors,) will be able to help Mom and baby during his absence will go a long way toward alleviating the new dad's worry. The unit Family Readiness Officer may be an additional source for information and referrals.
- *Jealousy*  
It is not uncommon for new fathers to feel a bit jealous of the amount of attention that is now focused on the baby. It is important to remember that infant needs must be met first, and that adults, because they are mature and capable, may need to wait for their needs to be met. If parents share in the household duties and care of the baby, they will have more time for one another.

### **How Might Mom Be Feeling?**

Moms share many of the same feelings. They also experience:

- *Exhaustion*  
Most new mothers are surprised at how tired they get caring for an infant 24 hours a day. A father needs to understand how draining this is for a new mom. When he comes home, his help with the baby is vital to strengthening the relationship and the family. Parents need to give each other their active support, recognition and encouragement every day.
- *Fulfillment and excitement*  
Many new mothers feel fulfilled and excited following childbirth. They enjoy touching, holding and cuddling their new babies. A very special love develops between the two of them as they get to know and love each other. A father who is away at the time of birth can also develop this special love for the baby when he returns.
- *Pressure or depression*  
It is not uncommon for a new mother to experience post-partum depression or what many people call "baby blues." New mothers go through noticeable physical and emotional changes during pregnancy and childbirth. Some mothers feel overwhelmed with the changes in their bodies, and with their baby's demands. New moms need help and understanding during the first few months to make the needed adjustments. Phone calls, e-mail and letters of encouragement stating how much the father values what mom is doing for the baby will help greatly.

- *Increased knowledge and confidence*  
New mothers have lots of time to learn about parenting and child care because they are usually the primary care givers. They learn about babies by trial and error, by reading, by talking to other good parents and by visiting the doctor. Fathers can also learn by these methods and are encouraged to join their wives in attending parenting classes. When moms and dads become knowledgeable and self-assured, marriages and family life are strengthened.

### ***Helping Children Cope with Combat Stress Injuries***

Children exposed to a Marine's symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can cause them to become as frightened, confused, and stressed as the Marine is. But they may have less ability to make sense of the changes in their lives. Invest as much time and energy as you can in helping your children cope using the following strategies:

- Explain the reasons for the PTSD symptoms in a way that's appropriate for the child's age and without going into disturbing details.
- Create opportunities for children to express their feelings, and occasionally get away from the home environment with the children so that you can focus just on them.
- Make sure children know they're not the cause of the parent's troubling behaviors.

Children of a parent with PTSD sometimes demonstrate similar emotional and behavioral difficulties, including anxiety, depression, angry outbursts, academic problems, hyperactivity, and difficulty relating to adults and other children. These children will benefit from therapy, individually with a therapist or with their parents and a therapist.

## Reunion Plans and Transition

Although there are challenges associated with homecoming, it is also an exciting time to plan with your children. Remember to allow for time for your family to transition together and relax. Be sure to make alternate reunion plans to reduce frustration and manage expectations.

The transition period can be a trying one. Be patient and try to start now and communicate with the deployed parent. Talk about some of the changes and milestones your child has been through. Discuss the feelings with both the parent and the child.

Remember that every deployment is different, each child is different, and all reactions are normal. It is not uncommon to have all children in the same house with different reactions! What is a happy and exciting time for one may be traumatic to another. Plan ahead! Identify some of the possible barriers for your family.

The following ideas are suggestions to help you and your children maintain routines and to help everyone cope during this time:

- Keep family routines (bedtime stories, mealtime chores, and Saturday morning pancakes) as normal as possible.
- Plan for changes in routine with the return of the deployed parent.
- Keep family rituals and celebrations (holiday celebrations, Saturday night at the movies, etc.).
- Help your children plan a special “Welcome Home” celebration.
- Include the returning parent in all family decisions.
- Remind your children that the same rules/limits apply now that the deployed parent has returned.
- Give your children time to adjust to change at their own rate and in their own way.

Ease back into family life. Most of us are creatures of habit, and that includes children. When a parent returns from deployment, it is usually best to maintain a child’s routine as much as possible. It is recommended that Marines returning from a deployment:

### **Be Patient**

- Go slowly and do not change rules or routines initially.
- Do not take it personally if children go to the parent who did not deploy.

## **Discipline**

- Approach discipline as a team.
- Refrain from punishing children for behaviors that took place during the deployment.
- Do not give in to children's demands because they feel guilty.

## **Get Involved**

- Play with children, or do chores together, because it is easier for many children to talk while they are engaged in an activity.
- Help with caretaking. Be confident that you can change diapers, drive the kids to extracurricular activities or help your child/ren get dressed.

## **Communicate**

- Thank children for sending letters, cards, packages or drawings, doing extra chores in their absence, doing well in school, cooperating with their parent.
- Give lots of hugs — including teenage children!
- Verbally express love and happiness to be home.

Rituals are activities that create a sense of family and feeling of bonding among family members. For example, family rituals or routines can provide a feeling of togetherness (we belong together), consistency (we have a picnic or cookout in the park every Fourth of July), identity (we're a camping family), and a way to teach values (we join the Martin Luther King Day march each January). When children take an active part in creating and practicing rituals, they feel connected and a part of something larger in their lives. In times of uncertainty and change, rituals can be the glue that holds a family together.

Talking to your children about what the returning parent likes to do often helps them process homecoming and gets them thinking about what they would like to do with their returning parent.

Things to remember when preparing yourself for the deployed parent's return:

- Being excited but also worried about the deployed parent's return home is natural and OK.
- Your children may have the same confusing feelings you do (worry, fear, happiness, excitement, etc.).
- The actual reunion with your family may not match what you've dreamed. Be realistic about what to expect.
- Everyone in your family has grown and changed while the deployed parent has been gone. Remember to be flexible.
- Things will never be exactly the same as they were before the deployed parent left.

## *Readiness and Deployment Support Training*

- It will take time and patience to readjust to being together again.
- Change is stressful for children as well as adults.
- Young children change so rapidly that a deployed parent may be surprised at how much a child has changed or how different family life has become.

Sharing your feelings about the deployed parent's return with your family and others will help.

## Resources

The resource section of this handbook is designed to complement and assist with post-deployment matters. Information resources include children's helpful websites and resources, and counseling support resources.

Please check with your local installation regarding the availability of counseling services for children through the Marine and Family Services: Family Advocacy Program (FAP), including the New Parent Support Program, and the Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC) Program. Please note, counseling services and support groups vary per military installations.

### ***Helpful Websites and Resources***

#### **American Academy of Pediatrics: Support for Military Children and Adolescents**

[www.aap.org/sections/unifserv/deployment/index.htm](http://www.aap.org/sections/unifserv/deployment/index.htm)

Provides information and resources to assist students in coping with deployment and beyond.

#### **Family Readiness Officer (FRO)**

The Family Readiness Officer (FRO) is the face of the Commander's vision and the hub of communication for the Unit, Personal and Family Readiness Program (UPFRP). The FRO provides direct coordination for UPFRP between the Commander, the Marines, the families, and all available resources and organizations, both on and off DoD installations.

#### **Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS)**

<http://www.usmc-mccs.org/cosc/focus.cfm?sid=ml&smid=9>

Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) is a resiliency-building program designed for military families and children facing the challenges of multiple deployment stress and combat operational stress injuries during wartime. It is an eight-week brief intervention that addresses difficulties that families may have when facing the challenges of multiple deployments and parental combat-related psychological and physical health problems. FOCUS also provides many other services to military families and children. Please visit [www.focusproject.org](http://www.focusproject.org) for area locations.

## **Military Child Education Coalition**

[www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)

This program identifies the challenges that face the highly mobile military child, increases awareness of these challenges, and implements programs to meet these challenges.

## **Military Child Initiative**

[www.jhsph.edu/mci](http://www.jhsph.edu/mci)

The Military Child Initiative assists public schools in improving the quality of education for highly mobile and vulnerable young people with a special focus on military children and their families by providing national, state and local education agencies, as well as schools, parents and health, child welfare, juvenile justice and educational professionals with information, tools, and services that enhance school success. It includes a Web-based course on “Building Resilient Kids.”

## **MilitaryFamilyBooks.com**

[www.militaryfamilybooks.com](http://www.militaryfamilybooks.com)

An excellent resource for books about the military and deployment for all family members, particularly children. The vision of MilitaryFamilyBooks.com is to offer carefully chosen, high-quality resources catered to the military families’ needs and lifestyles. A portion of the profits from MilitaryFamilyBooks.com supports programs for military families.

## **Military K-12 Partners**

<http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu/>

Is a DoDEA partnership program that provides information and support to increase understanding of the unique needs of military children as well as academic support to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for military children. DoDEA’s Educational Partnership Program works collaboratively with the Department of Education in efforts to ease the transition of military children and by providing resources to Local Education Authorities that educate military children. Through a variety of programs and partnership development the Educational Partnership promotes: quality education, seamless transitions, and deployment support.

## Operation Military Child Care

[www.childcareaware.org](http://www.childcareaware.org)

Operation Military Child Care is a DoD initiative to support child care needs of military parents. Active-duty families who are unable to access care on military installations are eligible during the deployment period and for 60 days after the return of the military parent.

This initiative helps eligible military families locate and subsidize affordable child care in local communities. Military families who are using licensed and legally operating community-based child care programs and providers pay reduced fees.

This subsidy program can be used by spouses who are employed or looking for work, going to school, or have special medical needs. For information, contact the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies at (800) 424-2246 or visit their Web site.

## Operation Military Kids

[www.operationmilitarykids.org](http://www.operationmilitarykids.org)

Operation Military Kids is a collaborative effort with America's communities to support children and youth of National Guard, Reserve and active-duty families. State 4-H military liaisons in 34 states in partnership with the National Guard, Reserve, the Military Child Education Coalition, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, The American Legion, schools, and other community organizations are supporting youth before, during, and after the deployment of a parent or loved one.

## School Liaison Officer (SLO)

<http://www.militaryk12partners.dodea.edu/resources.cfm?colId=liaison>

The mission of the School Liaison is to mobilize and use community resources to reduce the impact of the mobile military lifestyle on military school-age children and families; to implement predictable support services that assist school-age children with relocations, life transitions and achieving academic success.

School Liaison Officers support transitioning families in obtaining educational information and assistance from local school districts. The role and active involvement of the Installation Commander is critical to the success of the School Liaison program. The USMC School Liaison role is very comprehensive and is adapted at each installation according to the needs of the community.

## Sesame Workshops

[www.sesameworkshop.org/tlc](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/tlc)

To help address the needs of our preschool children, DoD and others partnered with the Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit organization that produces Sesame Street, to develop an outreach program for military families with young children.

“Talk, Listen, Connect” offers significant resources for military families experiencing the effects of deployments, multiple deployments, or when a parent returns home changed due to a combat-related injury.

Bilingual kit that includes a Sesame Street DVD, a parent/caregiver magazine, and a childrens activity poster designed to help military families and their young children with homecoming, changes, and grief.

## United Through Reading

<http://www.unitedthroughreading.org/military/>

The United Through Reading® Military Program helps ease the stress of separation for military families by having deployed parents read children’s books aloud via DVD for their child to watch at home.

This powerful program is available to all deploying military units and at select USO locations. It provides parents a chance to make powerful and lasting connections with their children and parent from afar.

## Working with Military Children

[www.nmfa.org/site/DocServer?docID=642](http://www.nmfa.org/site/DocServer?docID=642)

Booklet for school personnel working with military students.

## Zero to Three

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

Zero to Three is a nonprofit organization that provides information, training, and support to professionals, policymakers, and parents who seek to improve the lives of infants and toddlers. The organization provides resources that help promote the health and development of infants and toddlers, including early care and education, behavior and development, maltreatment, and information on public policy to help parents advocate for their children.

## Counseling Support Resources

### Chaplains

[www.anchordesk.navy.mil/HTM/ChaplainRoster.htm](http://www.anchordesk.navy.mil/HTM/ChaplainRoster.htm)

Chaplains play a vital role in helping their fellow sea-service personnel and family members during crucial moments in their lives. They are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide spiritual guidance and help “sort through” issues or concerns. Discussions with your chaplain are confidential.

### Family Advocacy Program (FAP)

Family Advocacy Program (FAP) personal and family counselors are available at your base installation FAP office to help you and your family cope with the challenges of marriage, parenting, deployment, reunion and reintegration.

You and eligible family members, including children, may each receive up to eight sessions with a family counselor per incident, per calendar year. If the situation mandates it, the sessions can be extended past eight.

Through a network of licensed counselors, you can receive guidance on topics including:

- Relationships and marital issues
- Parenting
- Stress
- Parent and teen communication
- Separation
- Divorce
- Family conflicts
- Grief and loss
- Life changes

### Give an Hour

[www.giveanhour.org](http://www.giveanhour.org)

Give an Hour is a nonprofit organization that provides free mental health services to U.S. military members and their families who are affected by the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC)

Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC) are funded by the Department of Defense. The MFLC program provides licensed counseling specialists to individual units who are remotely located and unable to access local services.

It has also expanded to augment on installation counseling services to provide short-term situational, problem-solving counseling services and psycho-education to service members and their families. Consultants do not keep records of counseling services.

Services are provided to individuals, couples, families, and groups on issues such as stress, anger, relationships, parenting, conflict resolution, deployment, separation, and more.

### **Military OneSource**

[www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

Military OneSource is a 24/7, real-time information and referral service, funded by the DoD. All services are free and are available to active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve personnel and their immediate family members, regardless of activation status.

Through Military OneSource, you can access up to 12 in-person or telephone non-medical counseling sessions per issue with a licensed counselor.

Resources to help with your children includes information about childhood health, children with special needs; child care, and parenting skills.

### **National Center for Post Traumatic Stress disorder**

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has a mission to advance the clinical care and social welfare of veterans through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. The website provides fact sheets, videos, and other information about trauma that can help answer questions. There is also information on how to locate mental health care providers.

### **Operation Healthy Reunions**

<http://www.nmha.org/reunions/resources.cfm>

This program provides education to help alleviate the stigma of mental health issues among servicemenbers and their families and ensure families receive prompt and high-quality care. Information available on the website includes returning home, coping with war, and coping with loss, as well as links to other resources.

### **Traumatic Brain Injury: The Journey Home**

[www.traumaticbraininjuryatoz.org](http://www.traumaticbraininjuryatoz.org),

This website provides information about Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), including information for patients, family members, and caregivers. There are many topics on the website to help patients understand the brain and results of injuries. The website also includes stories from TBI survivors and caregivers.

## **TRICARE**

[www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil).

The TRICARE website provides access to the many benefits of the health care program serving Uniformed Service members, retirees, and their families.

The website includes information about respite care for injured active duty service members and the primary caregiver. Respite care is short-term care to provide rest and change for the primary caregivers who care for the injured servicemember at home.