



# TIPS FOR DADS on Deployment

## Part SIX <sup>1</sup>

### After Deployment: Rejoining and Reintegrating



***If you thought your deployment ended the day your feet hit the ground back in the old U.S. of A., think again. In fact, coming home—and starting the process of rejoining and reintegrating into your family—is just the beginning of one of the hardest phases of the deployment. This phase can be divided into two basic stages: honeymoon and reintegration.***

***Your arrival at your front doorstep is just the beginning of a long process of reintegrating into your family. During the honeymoon phase, you will experience nothing but rainbows and butterflies. The first few days will be glorious, filled with hugs, kisses, and catching up on life with your kids and family. Most likely, you will enjoy welcome-home parties and maybe even a romantic weekend getaway where you and your partner can tentatively rediscover sex.***

***But after all that rose-colored dust settles, you'll move into the reintegration, or Humpty-Dumpty period, where life will be all about putting your family back together again. Reintegrating the family takes effort and commitment on everyone's part. Remember, your coparent has been managing the household while you were gone, and the kids have grown and probably taken on new tasks too. Eventually the family routine may return to what it was. Or your family will have to deal with a new "normal."***

<sup>1</sup> This is the sixth in a series of six National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse Spotlights, which provide tips for dads on deployment. The series is authored by Armin Brott, a former Marine, fatherhood author (Ask Mr. Dad), and host of the radio show Positive Parenting for Military Families. The series was developed with assistance from Nigel Vann (Fathers Incorporated).

# The Honeymoon Begins ... and Ends

All honeymoons come to an end. It isn't easy to pinpoint when that will happen. Generally speaking, it's when the excitement, novelty, and charged emotions of the homecoming have worn off. The honeymoon phase is typically shorter after long deployments and longer after short ones. Other factors that can get in the way of long, leisurely honeymoons include:

- Physical and/or psychological injuries.
- Being in a relatively new relationship or marriage.
- Having a coparent who didn't get much social support while you were gone.
- Preparing for a new deployment before you've even unpacked from the last one.

The most challenging—and most important—aspect of the honeymoon period is keeping your expectations reasonable.

## After the Honeymoon Ends: Reintegration

For most military families, the post-honeymoon period can be quite jarring. It can be tough when the reunion and honeymoon don't play out the way you had imagined. Be aware that family problems that existed before your deployment may still be there and may have gotten worse.

To help the whole family adjust, it is vital that you spend some time reflecting on how things have changed. Make sure you respect and understand how your deployment experiences, and your return home, may be affecting your coparent and kids.



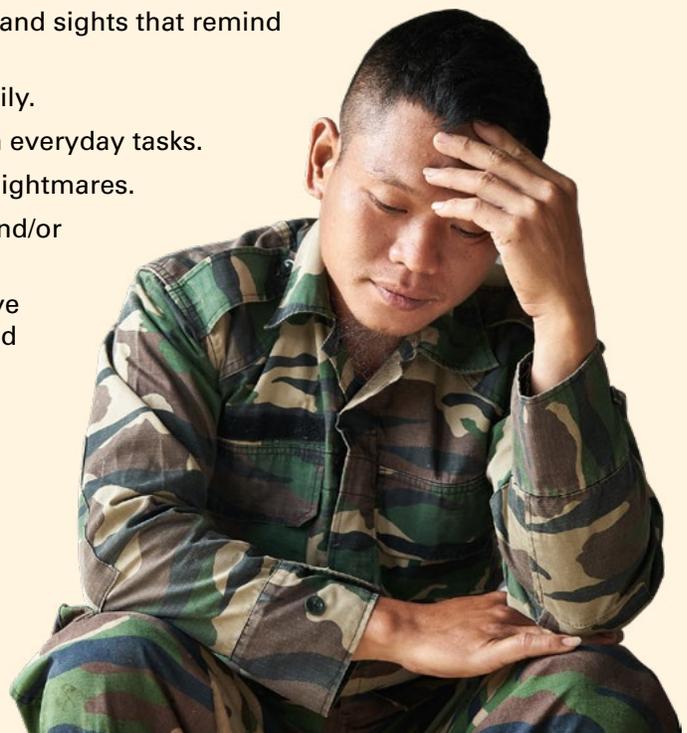
# What's Going on With You?

Returning veterans often experience some of the following thoughts and experiences:

- **Will my family have any idea what I've been through?** Could they ever understand?
- **Who are these people, anyway?** If you have very young children, a year is a huge chunk of time. Unless you've seen pictures or videos of them on a regular basis, you may not recognize your own kids. The same holds true if you have teenagers.
- **Jealousy.** You might be jealous that your children seem to prefer your coparent over you. Or you may be jealous that your coparent has made new friends and taken up new interests while you were gone.
- **What happened to my friends?** If your friends weren't deployed, they may not understand what you've been through. You also may find yourself thinking that you don't have much in common with them now.
- **What happened to the family routines?** Your coparent has been the primary decision maker while you were gone, and the kids may have taken on some of your old chores. It's doubtful that things will ever return 100 percent to the way they were. Instead, you and your family will probably end up creating new hybrid routines that combine the best features from the pre-deployment and deployment phases.
- **Did they ...?** One very common fear returning dads have is that their partner was unfaithful while they were gone. Sadly, this sometimes happens. But do not leap to conclusions and start making any accusations.

## IF YOU SERVED IN OR NEAR A COMBAT ZONE, YOU MAY...

- Be extremely sensitive to sounds, smells, and sights that remind you of your combat experiences.
- Be obsessive about the safety of your family.
- Have trouble concentrating or focusing on everyday tasks.
- Have disturbing memories, dreams, and nightmares.
- Feel irritable, angry, distracted, anxious, and/or emotionally numb.
- Blame yourself for a buddy's death, or have "survivor's guilt," wondering why they died but you didn't.
- Be worried about friends who are still deployed.
- Crave the excitement and adrenaline rush that only military combat can produce.
- Feel isolated and withdrawn, as though you don't fit in anywhere anymore.



# What's Going on With Your Partner?

## Your partner may be concerned about things like:

- Will you still love them?
- Will you be proud of the way they managed things while you were gone?
- Are you okay? Has your deployment experience changed you?
- Have you been faithful?
- Will you still be sexually attracted to them?
- Will you be interested in rebuilding your intimate relationship, or will you just want to have sex?

## Here's what the two of you will have to do so your relationship continues to work:

- Lean on and support each other.
- Decide whether you'll go back to your pre-deployment roles and responsibilities or create a new "normal."
- Negotiate with each other and make decisions together.
- Remember how to coparent.
- Renegotiate family rules and rituals.
- Respect and understand each other's need for independence.
- Keep expectations reasonable.

# What's Going on With Your Kids?

Children very often feel the same confusing emotions as the adults around them: worry, fear, stress, happiness, excitement, and other emotions. Exactly how your children react to your coming home will depend, in part, on their age and maturity level. Here's a quick look at what they might be feeling:

- **Birth to 12 months.** An infant probably won't recognize you. When you hold them, they may cry, fuss, or pull away from you.
- **1 to 3 years.** A toddler may not recognize you either. Even if they do, they may hide behind mom or a piece of furniture, be clingy, take a while to get used to you, and possibly have temper tantrums.
- **3 to 5 years.** Preschoolers may have all sorts of interesting and conflicting reactions. They may try to get your attention by acting out, hiding, or running away from you. They may seem angry and want to punish you for being gone. On the other hand, they may be overexcited and chatter nonstop about everything that's happened since you left.
- **6 to 12 years.** Young children may be anxious about how their role in the family will change now that you're back. They might insist that you give them your full attention. They may brag about you to their friends but might still be angry at you for having left in the first place.
- **Teens.** Teenagers can exhibit a dizzying array of emotions and behavior. They may be moody and aloof or excited to have you back, or excited but not want to show it. They may be concerned about how your return might affect any privileges they've earned, such as driving the car and having more sleepovers. Or they might worry you're going to try to change their behavior or disapprove of their new friends.

# Staying Involved with Your Partner

- **Give your partner or coparent a little breathing room.** They probably settled into a new routine while you were gone. If you ask them to change their routine again when you return, they may not be too thrilled with the idea.
- **Don't overload your partner with reunion activities.** They may see your return as a chance to relax and let you take on some of your old responsibilities. Don't add to their stress level by asking for a lot of reunion parties. Enjoy some down time together.
- **Jump back in.** Your coparent may have been so focused on the kids that they quickly attend to the kids' needs without considering yours. Taking on as much of the kid duty as possible will show that you're serious about wanting to rejoin the family team.
- **Go ahead and fight.** Although you and your partner both want everything about the reunion to be perfect, it can be a tense, emotionally charged time. Expect arguments. Lots of them. About sex, money, roles and responsibilities, the children, and other topics. But when (not if) you do fight, at least agree to fight fairly. That means staying focused on the issue at hand and not bringing up the past or dragging other people into it. It also means making a firm commitment to finding solutions rather than scoring points.
- **Give yourselves time.** Take it easy on each other. It will take at least a couple of weeks before you both feel like a couple again. Working together on even the simplest things will be an adjustment, such as putting together a grocery list, deciding where to go for dinner, or picking out a movie to rent. It may take even longer to make bigger decisions, such as what kind of car to buy, the amount of personal space you each need, and whether you should sign up for another tour. When the time is right to make the big decisions, be sure you and your partner make them together.
- **Just hang out.** Start off with low-stress activities that you know you'll both enjoy, such as going to the movies, bowling, having a picnic, playing cards, taking a long walk, reading, listening to (or playing) music, or doing a sport together. Ease into being comfortable with each other before heading off on a romantic weekend or planning a family vacation.
- **Limit the deployment stories.** Save the battlefield stories—especially the ones that involve violence or death—for when you get together with your war buddies. Instead, talk about all the family stuff you missed, such as home cooking, how the kids have changed, and just being around everyone.
- **Show gratitude.** Your coparent handled a lot of extra responsibilities while you were gone. Never pass up an opportunity to say how grateful you are that they kept everything running smoothly. And if family, friends, or others in your circle lent a hand during your deployment, thank them too.
- **Watch your tongue.** The expression “having a mouth like a sailor” is hardly limited to the Navy. It's going to be tough to switch back to a G- or PG-rated vocabulary but do try. And make a special effort to use real words instead of lapsing into military speak and peppering your conversations with acronyms and abbreviations.
- **Know when to get help.** You and your partner have both been through a lot over the past few months. If either or both of you need help, get it. It will be good for you and good for your relationship.

- **Quit worrying about sex.** Take it slow. Re-igniting a sexual relationship after a long break can be almost like having sex for the first time. The more pressure you put on yourself to perform, the greater the likelihood that you'll be disappointed—either in your own performance or in the experience as a whole.
- **Talk, listen, watch, and listen some more.** Your partner will want to hear everything about your deployment—the good and the bad, the scary and the funny, the disturbing and the heartwarming. But most of all, they'll want to hear that you love them and missed them. They'll also want to tell you their stories. Listen carefully and respectfully. After all, while you were away they were dodging bullets of their own, and they need you to understand and appreciate their experiences too.



# Staying Involved with Your Children

- **Focus on the kids.** The moment you walk in the door, everyone will be competing for your attention. To the extent possible, spend as much time as you can focused on the children. You and your partner can hang out after the kids hit the sack.
- **Embrace reality.** Reuniting with your family is not about your preconceived plans. It's about sharing your family's excitement in their newfound activities and friendships. Take comfort in the new activities and family fun you'll create with the kids.
- **Slow down.** Let the children set the pace. Try to make your reunion as relaxed as possible and don't be tempted to make any sudden changes. Keep your plans simple and flexible and your expectations low. You can always do more tomorrow.
- **Smile and don't criticize.** Your kids missed you a lot when you were gone, and they want family life to be joyful now you're home. They're proud of their new responsibilities and how grown up they are. If you blow into town and start complaining about the way someone is loading the dishwasher or wield your authority and insist that things must be done your way now, they'll be devastated. So, compliment your children as much as you can, and bite your tongue before you make any disapproving remarks.
- **Your children are observing.** As we said in Before You Deploy (parts 2 and 3 of this series of "Tips for Deployed Dads"), you are the model for how your children will behave. The more they see you and your coparent working with each other, communicating openly, negotiating respectfully, and compromising when necessary, the faster they'll adjust to your return home.

## Some Specific Activities to Do with Your Children



- **Birth to 12 months.** Hold, hug, bathe, change, feed, play, relax, play some more, and marvel at all the cool things babies can do.



- **1 to 3 years.** Hug, hold, and kiss as much as you can, but understand that your toddler may not know you and could cry, seem afraid, or run to your coparent. Give them plenty of space, get down on the floor, and play on their level.



- **3 to 5 years.** Play with them, a lot. Give them lots of praise and say "I love you" a lot. Read with them, do art projects, talk, and listen.



- **6 to 12 years.** Do the same things as for your 3- to 5-year old, plus ask lots of questions about what their life was like when you were gone. Ask to see their schoolwork, scrapbooks, trophies, and more. Tell them, in an age-appropriate way, about what you experienced.

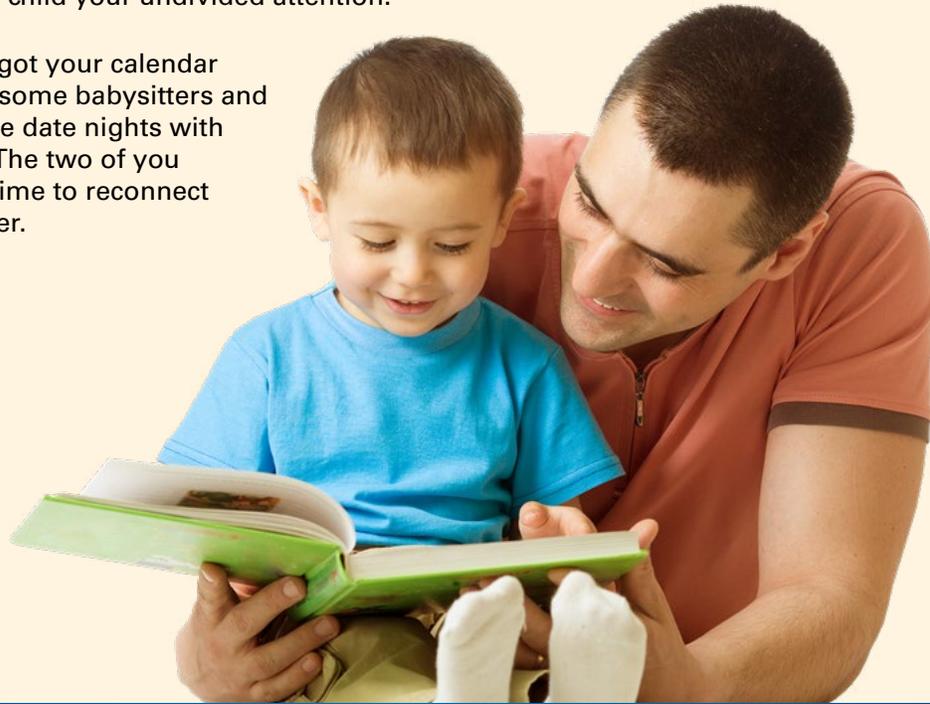


- **Teens.** Be prepared for some long talks about politics, war, casualties, and justice. Talk about your experiences and listen to your child's. Don't make judgments or criticize what they share. Learn to text message. It's "gr8. 4 real."



## GRAB YOUR CALENDAR

- Try to schedule some one-on-one time with each child. It doesn't have to be an all-day affair. Just taking a walk around the block, reading a story together, or going out for lunch are effective ways to bond with your child.
- If you have more time, go to the zoo, a museum, a concert, or the movies. If you have enough time, go on a weekend camping trip.
- What's most important is to do things that your children want to do and make sure that you give each child your undivided attention.
- While you've got your calendar open, line up some babysitters and schedule some date nights with your partner. The two of you need quality time to reconnect with each other.



## HELPFUL RESOURCES

### National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

- [Managing your marriage after deployment](#) (2010)
- [Tips for understanding military couple relationships after deployment](#) (2012)

### Sierra Club

- If you like the outdoors—or even if you don't— check out the [Military Outdoors](#) website, which features opportunities for outdoor camping experiences for returning servicemen and their children. Cosponsored by the Sierra Club, the YMCA, and Blue Star Families, these recreational programs will give you and your kids a chance to reconnect, bond, and have a ton of fun hiking, camping, swimming, boating, and a lot more.
- [Blue Star Families](#) was founded in 2009 by military spouses to help military and Veteran families overcome the isolation and alienation of frequent moves and deployments. The organization provides support and resources to foster spouse career development, address food insecurity, build family strength, and provide peer support for caregivers.