

VETERAN PARENTS WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

(6-12 YEARS)



**VETERAN PARENTING TOOLKIT:
TOGETHER BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES**



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Note: This booklet is intended to provide general information only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for individualized mental health services. If you have concerns about a specific situation, contact your health professional directly.

If you feel depressed for more than a couple of days, are unable to care for your child, or have thoughts of hurting your child or yourself, please call your doctor or pediatrician immediately.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creation of these toolkits has depended on the work and support of many people to whom we wish to express our sincere gratitude.

The creation and dissemination of the toolkits were supported by a Clinical Educator Grant sponsored by the VISN 16 South Central Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) under the leadership of Greer Sullivan, M.D., M.S.P.H., and Michael Kauth, Ph.D.

We wish to thank out content reviewers, Jeanne Hoffman, Ph.D. (Tripler Army Medical Center), Susan Schmidt, Ph.D. (University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center), and Michelle Kees, Ph.D. (University of Michigan) and our copy editor, Sonora Hudson, M.A., for their excellent review and editing of the manual. We appreciate the graphic design work created by Zac Logsdon of Old Hat Design.

We also wish to thank and applaud all of our service members, their families and their children. Thank you all for your service.

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August 2010

WELCOME

Congratulations on raising your child through the preschool years into the elementary-school-age years! Having a school-age child in the house can be exciting yet also busy and stressful. Big changes are ahead in the next couple of years, and they are sure to bring opportunities for you to learn, grow, and strengthen your relationship with your child.

As you well know, school-age children are gaining more independence and having more interactions with friends and the community than they did before. Parents often have many questions. This is normal. This guide is designed to help Veterans and their families better understand and relate to their child, especially following deployment.

Having a school-age child challenges parents to work together as a team, as you need to discuss and negotiate many daily decisions. As you share and juggle the household and parenting duties, don't be surprised if you sometimes have different opinions about how to perform these tasks. That's common and ok. There's no one "right" way, so respect each other's approach. When families are welcoming a parent back into the family after a deployment, parenting can be extra challenging.

We created this booklet to remind you that:

- You are not alone.
- Many families are experiencing similar challenges.
- Resources are available to support you in being the best parent you can be.

Congratulations on your commitment to parenting and your interest in learning more about your child!



DID YOU KNOW?

This is a "prime time" for learning language, math, and other important skills!

During elementary school, children grow (on average) 2.5 inches and gain 5-7 pounds every year.



Boys tend to use objects (such as balls and cars) for pretend play, while girls are more likely to pretend to be a different person (such as during dress up and acting) and explore relationships through pretend play.

Most children's friends will be of the same gender at the beginning of the school-age years, but friendships with kids of the opposite gender will increase as children approach adolescence.

Your child will be able to pay attention a lot longer than when he/she was younger. In fact, attention spans increase from 10 to 15 minutes (early part of the school-age years) to almost an hour (by age 10).

American children (ages 8-18) spend more than 7.5 hours per day on their computers; plugged into MP3 players; watching TV; or playing video, computer or handheld games. For much of that time, they are doing several of these at once.¹

During the school-age years, girls develop physically faster than boys, but boys tend to catch up during adolescence.

¹ Rideout, V.J., Foer, R.G., & Roberts, D.F. (2010). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds: A Kaiser Family Foundation study*. Menlo Park, CA. Retrieved from Henry Kaiser Family Foundation website: www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL YEARS?

As a parent, it can be helpful to know what new skills and behaviors to expect in your child during this time. Your child is constantly growing, gaining new skills, and learning new things. School-age children are beginning to discover their strengths and weaknesses. So, it's really helpful to acknowledge and celebrate things they do well and pay attention to what seems to be challenging (so you can provide additional support).



Please note: No child follows exactly these milestones, and no two children develop at exactly the same pace. The timetables are just a guide for what “average development” looks like. If you have concerns about your child's development, please talk to your doctor.

Here are some typical changes that occur for school-age children:

Physical

- Children love physical activity, such as climbing, jumping, and running.
- Around ages 6-7, baby teeth begin to fall out, and adult teeth replace them.
- Kids often enjoy hobbies that improve their fine motor skills (such as sewing, building models, or creating art) and gross motor skills (balancing, riding a bike on two wheels).
- Children grow more slowly compared with earlier years (but later school-age years may include the beginning of puberty, which brings many changes).

Emotional / Social

- School-age children typically develop skills for coping with strong emotions, but need help and comfort from parents or other caretakers when feeling very sad or upset.
- Kids start to play further away from parents (in a different room or at a friend's house). Other kids become more important, but parents are still extremely important.
- In the school setting, children may start to face issues of teasing, bullying and even rejection by other kids. Parents can help their children learn social skills by supporting them in responding to these issues in an appropriate manner.
- Playtime is the backbone of childhood development, as kids learn social norms, develop self-esteem, and begin to understand the world around them. School-age children often enjoy competition (with adults and kids) in games and sports.
- During the school years, children tend to play with friends of the same gender. When they become teenagers, opposite-sex friendships become more common and important.



Cognitive (Mental Ability)

- School-age children’s understanding of the world becomes much more complex than before, and they start to define a unique sense of “self” that is different from that of other kids.
- The attention span of young school-age kids is about 15 to 20 minutes. This grows as they approach adolescence, to being able to pay attention for about one hour per activity.
- Math and reading skills develop a great deal during school, and children improve their abilities to describe their thoughts and feelings through writing and speaking.
- As children grow, they shift from simply following the rules to thinking matters through with logic. You will notice that they may ask you challenging questions (such as “Why?” and “Why not?”). Be reassured that they are not always trying to challenge you, but are exploring and practicing their abstract thinking.
- Most school-age children can remember and follow three-part directions (such as “Come downstairs, wash your hands, and come to the dinner table.”) The complexity of directions can increase (slowly) as kids grow. Children who are slower to develop or who have attention difficulties may need shorter directions given to them step-by-step.

A note about boys and girls: Although every child is unique, in general boys and girls develop at different rates. You may notice differences between your children, and understanding these gender differences can be useful. For example:

Girls tend to show signs of puberty before boys. Be prepared to answer your child’s questions related to body differences, development, and sexuality during elementary school. You may find some of the books listed in the resource section in the back of this booklet helpful for discussing puberty and sex education with your child. It’s important for you to be open to talking about these issues throughout your child’s development, and to take your child’s questions seriously. Open communication now will lay the groundwork for continued discussions as your child grows and matures.

Adapted from: www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/devmile.htm
www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pdfs/fcs465.pdf
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002017.htm
www.welcomebackparenting.org



RECONNECTING WITH YOUR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD AFTER DEPLOYMENT

So, you get off the plane, run into the arms of your family, enjoy all the homecoming festivities, greet your wonderful child, and suddenly have this amazingly close connection to your children, know everything about your child's unique routines and needs, and are ready to jump into 24/7 parenting, right?

Typically, NOT! This may feel like a culture shock for you, and it's important to give it time. For some families, the adjustments go smoothly, while others require more patience. With time and some effort, you and your child can create a strong, happy relationship.

Just like adults, children vary in how they react to their returning parent. It may help to know that:

- Your child may have strong feelings (worry, sadness, anger) about your deployment. Don't be surprised if he/she is shy or timid about re-connecting with you. Your child may try to keep you "at a distance" to prevent him/herself from sadness at your leaving again (even if you're not going to be deployed again). On the other hand, your child may feel angry at you for having been gone and may be more moody and aggressive than usual. An older child may test the limits with you, acting in a defiant way and refusing to follow your directions.
 - These reactions can be tough, but it's important to avoid taking the behavior personally. Remember that it may take some time for your child to begin to trust and feel close to you.
 - Strive to be patient and understanding.
- The strong emotions surrounding homecoming can be both exciting and confusing for children. School-age children are still learning how to express their feelings verbally, and you may see temporary changes in your child's eating, sleeping, activity level, attention-seeking behavior, and mood.
- Your child may worry that you're going to be deployed again. He/she may also notice changes in you that are confusing, especially if you're dealing with combat-stress reactions or other challenges. When kids worry a lot, they may be less able to concentrate on their schoolwork.

"The homecoming was amazing. But then it's the day after and the day after that, and this feeling of what now?"

Sergeant Major Jason Peach quoted in *The Guardian* (2007, December 1) by Dave Hill. 'We won't know for a long time what this has done to us.'



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD ABOUT YOUR DEPLOYMENT

It is very important to talk to your child about your deployment. Some parents aren't sure what to say and how to begin the conversation. Here are some helpful tips on how to discuss this topic with your school-age child.

- Be ready for your child to ask questions.
 - Your child's questions may seem random, repetitive and out of the blue. This is normal. He/she may need to hear your answer several times to fully understand you.
- Introduce the topic yourself.
 - Read books or watch videos (see examples in the Resource List at end of this booklet) that describe other children experiencing deployment and reunion. Talking about someone else or a fictional character may be easier for your child than sharing his/her own feelings.
 - As a family, write a storybook about your family's experience with the deployment(s). Your child can blog or write a short story about his/her experiences before, during and after the deployment.
 - Look through pictures together of events that took place during deployment both pictures you took while overseas (not anything that may upset your child) and those taken back at home of your child/family. Pictures can be a great way to start a conversation and to share memories.
- Not sure what to say? Be honest, and talk at your child's level.
 - Use a level of detail that "fits" your child's age and emotional maturity. If you're not sure what is appropriate, check it out with a trusted friend, family member, or healthcare provider.
 - Explain (in child-friendly language) that you were protecting our country to keep us safe.
 - Share some of the positive things you did during your deployment, such as re-building a school or helping children.
- Acknowledge that you missed out on a lot in your child's life.
 - Explain that you are sad that you missed his/her birthday party, basketball games, and trick-or-treating together for Halloween, (etc.), and that you are happy to be home now.



- Show interest in what your child was doing while you were away. Look through pictures and school projects, and ask questions about his/her activities.
- Realize your child may be confused about your absence.
 - Younger school-age children may believe that they caused their military parent to go away, or that their parent left because he/she did not care about the child. You may see this in their play as they act out stories about separations and reunions.
 - Reassure your child that you did not want to leave him/her, that he/she was not responsible for the departure, and that you are happy to be home.
- Know that your child may have strong feelings about your deployment and may fear that you will leave again.
 - Try to be open to hearing your child’s feelings about your absence—both his/her pride in your service and sadness at your absence.
 - Older school-age children may worry about the war and whether his/her parent might be deployed again.
- Reassure your child.
 - If you may be deployed again, emphasize that you are right now, you are here, and that you will tell your child if you need to leave again. Also stress that someone will always be there to take care of him/her—and say who that person will be.



Final note: In general when talking about deployment, speak in an unemotional, calm way and avoid giving specifics about dangerous situations you may have encountered. If you’re struggling emotionally and are unable to talk calmly about your deployment, it may be helpful for your child to talk to other supportive adults.



TIPS ON STRENGTHENING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD

- Remember that your children have grown and changed while you were gone.
- With your partner’s help, become involved in the daily routines with your child. Routines are a great time to connect with and care for your child. As a returning service member, you have unique strengths in creating an environment that is predictable and safe.
- Try to spend some one-on-one quiet time with your child every day, even if just for a few minutes. Ask questions about his/her experiences, and listen carefully to what he/she wants to tell you. Figure out what your child likes doing (such as his/her favorite game/toy) and play together often. Also, do relaxing, calm activities together (such as reading books, listening to music, taking a walk)
- Tell your children often that you love them.
- Notice and reward positive behaviors.
- Don’t rush into setting new, strict limits or being a harsh disciplinarian—allow your partner to keep that role as much as possible while you are settling back into family life. Similarly, keep your child’s routines the same as they were during the deployment, especially around sleeping, eating and activities (such as church, dance, sports).
- Encourage your child to ask questions and to talk about his/her feelings or worries.
- Address acting-out behavior involving aggression or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly. Parents need to set clear expectations, limits, and consequences for such behavior.

“When Specialist Jaymie Holschlag returned home after 12 months in Iraq, a new set of children awaited her. Her son, Seth, 10...was angry and depressed...in (her) absence, new rules had taken hold — chocolate syrup on waffles, Mountain Dew with dinner. Any hint of a return to the old order met with tirades and tantrums.”

Alvarez, L. (2009, September 27).
Wartime soldier: Conflicted Mom.
New York Times, p. 1A.

Special Tips for Partners/Family Members

- Give your Veteran support in getting to know your child again. This can be a special time for the two of you as you share in the joys of your child's spirit, endearing behaviors, growing skills and abilities, and energy.
- Your Veteran may have some great ideas about how to parent. Your child may respond to these new techniques well, so be creative and try them out! As long as the child is safe, it's ok for your Veteran to do things differently than you.
- Work together with your Veteran to include him/her in your child's daily routines. For example, you may decide that he/she always helps the children with homework after dinner. Tricky as it may be for you, try to let your Veteran create his/her own routines and ways of doing the task instead of jumping in with, "No, that's not the way I do it."

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org



SPECIFIC ISSUES WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Parenting a school-age child can be both challenging and rewarding. This section contains suggestions on how to deal with some of the most common issues faced by parents of school-age children: discipline, encouraging responsibility (such as homework and chores), and fostering healthy relationships (with friends and adults). If you have concerns about other issues, talk to your child's healthcare provider and/or look at some of the resources listed in the back of this booklet.

Discipline

Discipline is so much more than simply responding to your child's misbehavior. Did you know that the word "discipline" comes from the same word as to "teach"? It's helpful to think about discipline as an opportunity to teach your child about expectations, values, and the impact and consequences of his/her behavior (both good and bad).

Here are some practical suggestions for disciplining your child:

- Model respect, politeness and responsibility. Your behavior speaks volumes more than your words. "Do as I say and not as I do" is confusing and typically does not work.
- Have clear and consistent rules and expectations. Review key rules together as a family, write them on a poster board, and post them in your home (such as on the fridge).
- Check your expectations to make sure they are realistic and appropriate for your child's age and needs. For example, 5-year-olds should not be expected to pick up after themselves without reminders, but most 12-year-olds should be able to do so on their own.
- You get more of what you notice. When you see your children following the rules or behaving in a respectful manner, praise them.
- For behaviors that are annoying and aimed at getting attention (such as whining), the most effective consequence may be to simply ignore them. At first, your child may do the behavior more, but he/she will quickly learn that that approach isn't working and will stop the behavior.
- If your child is consistently demonstrating certain problem behaviors, pay attention to when and where those behaviors occur. For example,
 - ✓ Does your child tend to act out when hungry or tired? An after-school snack or earlier bedtime may be more helpful than consequences in addressing the behavior.
 - ✓ Does your child seem to misbehave when feeling sad or frustrated? Exploring what he/she is feeling may help to address the underlying issue.



- When your child misbehaves, calmly and consistently give a consequence. The most effective consequences are
 - **Immediate**
 - **Related to the problem behavior**
 - ✓ When it is safe and appropriate to do so, let the result of the behavior be the consequence. This is called a “natural consequence.” For example, if your child leaves a favorite toy outside and it gets ruined in the rain, the child can no longer play with that toy.
 - ✓ If a natural consequence is not possible, create a consequence related to the problem behavior. This is called a “logical consequence.” For example, if your children are fighting over a toy, remove the toy for a set period of time.
 - **An opportunity to “make things right.”** For example, if your child steals money from you, he/she could do extra tasks to earn money to pay you back.
 - **Relatively brief.** For example, a 5-minute “time-out” may be effective for young children, after which time you can shift to focusing on your child’s positive behavior.
 - **Delivered in a calm tone.** If you become very angry or upset, your child will be far less likely to learn from the consequence. In fact, your child will mainly be responding to your anger and may be more likely to continue the misbehavior. On the other hand, consequences presented in a calm fashion can produce learning.
- Monitor the TV shows, video games, and internet sites your child sees/visits. Research is clear: children learn from and copy the behavior they see around them. Although you can’t control everything your child experiences, try to expose him/her to positive behaviors and limit viewing of violent/disrespectful media.



Encouraging Responsibility

All parents want their children to grow into responsible, successful teenagers and adults. You can start teaching your children about responsibility from an early age. What does it mean to be responsible?

- Being respectful of others
- Having compassion and empathy for others
- Being honest with yourself and others
- Showing courage, even when it's hard
- Making good choices
- Being able to control yourself

So, how can you teach your children to be responsible?

Chores

Have your children gradually become responsible for caring for their belongings and doing some household tasks. A first grader could be responsible for placing his/her dirty clothes in the hamper. A third grader could help unload the dishwasher (not sharp knives, though). A sixth grader could start doing his/her laundry.

When giving your child chores,

- Don't assume that he/she knows how to do a task. Take the time to explain exactly how to do the chore. Work with your child and offer help the first few times he/she tries it.
- Be very clear about all the steps involved in a chore, and share your specific expectations. "Clean your room" may mean something different to your child than it does to you.
- Many children need a system for keeping track of their jobs. A chart (showing each family member's jobs and the days he/she is expected to do each task) can be very helpful.

Pets and Plants

Give your child a living thing to care for, such as a low-maintenance plant and, eventually, maybe a pet.

Allowance

Giving your children an allowance and letting them make decisions about saving and spending money can teach responsibility. Allowing your child to experience the benefits of saving (as well as the consequences of spending all of your money at once and not having any later), teaches the value of money and how to manage it responsibly.

While building a sense of responsibility in your children, there are a few important things to keep in mind:

- **Have appropriate expectations.** Make sure your expectations match your child's age and level of maturity. Expectations that are too high for a child (such as expecting your first grader to pack his/her lunch all by him/herself) will result in frustration and maybe even giving up. Expectations that are too easy (helping your sixth grader pick out clothes each day) deprive your child the chance to learn certain life skills and may lead him/her to wonder why you lack confidence in his/her abilities. As always, if you aren't sure what is appropriate for your child, check out the books in the reference section of this booklet or talk to someone you trust, such as a teacher or pediatrician.
- **Allow for failure.** You need to allow your kids to fail! As hard as it may be for you as a parent, remember that kids cannot learn responsibility unless they experience the results of mistakes and irresponsibility. So, try to avoid constantly rescuing your child (of course, always be sure he/she is safe). If children repeatedly forget their lunch, it is ok for them to go without it for a day.
- **Celebrate responsible behavior.** Praise your children when they act in responsible ways, treat others with care and respect, and act with courage and honesty (even when it's hard). Let your kids know that you notice and admire these behaviors.





Fostering Healthy Relationships

Building new relationships with friends and adults is one of the joys of the elementary and middle school years. During this time, children become increasingly interested in kids their own age but still need parents to help them succeed in these new relationships. Friendships teach valuable skills about closeness, negotiation, loyalty, communication and conflict resolution.

There are many things you can do to support your child in building good friendships.

- Know your child's friends and their parents.
 - Welcome your child's friends into your home to play.
 - Invite the parent(s) and children over to your house for playtime, a shared activity, or meal.
 - Plan "play dates" with your child's friends and their families.
 - Before allowing your child to play at a friend's house, ask if you can stop by and meet the parents and see the home. Ask about their household rules and expectations.
 - Get to know other parents at school and other sporting events.

- Create clear rules and expectations.
 - When friends come over to your house, remind both your children and their friends of your house's rules.
 - Before your child goes to a friend's house:
 - Make sure he/she knows how to contact you (or another trusted adult) in case of emergency.
 - Create a plan (together) about your expectations, such as:
 - Call me (or send a text message) immediately if you're ever in danger or need help.
 - You need to come home by the set time/curfew.
 - It's not ok to use or be around alcohol or drugs. If others in the home are doing so, it's time for you to come home.
 - Create clear and consistent consequences if these rules are broken.
 - Teach your children basic rules about personal safety (such as, don't go places with adults you don't know; your "private parts" are private). Discuss their right to say "no" to any behaviors from other children or adults that leave them feeling uncomfortable.

- Be available and interested in their friendships
 - Talk to your children about their friends – what they do with their friends, which friends they like and why, and what they think makes a good friend.
 - Even as children move towards more time with their peers, they still look to you as a resource and model for how to manage relationships. Continue to make time to talk to your child. Doing an activity together that your child enjoys can be a great way to keep open the lines of communication.

- Consider involving your child in sports, after-school clubs, or other activities
 - Structured sports, lessons, and activities can be great ways for your child to develop friendships with other children.
 - Talk to your child about his/her interests and abilities, and then find an activity that is a good fit. Boys' and Girls' Clubs, the local YMCA, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, and community centers all have activities for elementary school children.
 - Although some activities are good, don't overdo it! One or two activities is plenty. Remember that your child still needs some unstructured play time.
 - Get to know the coaches and leaders of these activities. If you can, consider volunteering yourself.
 - Community service can be a great way to build relationships and expose your child to different people and admirable adults. Consider volunteering as a family.





WHAT ARE RED FLAGS FOR CONCERN WITH YOUR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD?

Sometimes it's really tough to know if your child's behavior is "normal" or if you should seek professional advice. You know your child the best, and you know when his/her behavior has changed from what is "normal" for him/her.

Research has found that the following behaviors may indicate difficulties in school-age children:

- A change in your child's level of clinginess, irritability, crying or whining (including refusing to go to school)
- Having difficulty calming down and being comforted by you
- High levels of aggression (hurting toys, pets, other children, themselves)
- Considerable changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Losing skills that had previously been mastered (such as talking or toilet training) or showing significant delays in milestones (achievements expected for that age) discussed in the development section of this pamphlet
- Strong feelings of anger and sadness that last for a considerable period of time
- Difficulties with learning
- Difficulties getting along with other kids—or not having any friends and being withdrawn
- Any major change in personality, moods, or routines from how he/she was during deployment

Remember: School-age children (like adults) have bad days—this is normal! You may see more difficulties during times of higher family stress like when a Veteran returns after a deployment; these short-term reactions usually go away with time. However, if problems persist over a couple of months, your child and family may benefit from guidance from a healthcare professional.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

Note: If you find yourself struggling with anger, substance abuse, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, parenting may be more challenging. It may be valuable to seek support/professional help if you find yourself reacting poorly to or feeling overwhelmed by your child's behavior.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS?

If you need moral support or a “listening ear” about parenting, you may want to contact

- A friend (especially one who has children)
- A relative
- Someone from a community organization (such as your church, book club, etc.)

If you want to gather more information about a specific issue, you can

- Check out a book at the library.
- Look online at the helpful websites in our resource list.
- Ask your pediatrician for information on the topic.
- Talk to your child’s teacher.

Other helpful resources include your

- Pediatrician or child’s doctor
- Nurse line
- Child’s teacher or school counselor
- Mental health professional
- Department of Human Services
- Community/county health department
- WIC (Women, Infants and Children) offices



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AS A PARENT

Being a parent is probably one of the most difficult jobs you will ever have, but also one of the most rewarding. You are truly the most important person/people in your child's life—an amazing opportunity, but sometimes a big sense of responsibility, too.

It's easy to glamorize the job of parenting when you see pictures or watch movies of happy families, with everyone smiling, a beautiful baby bouncing in someone's arms, and the family off for a fun day at the zoo. Those special times are great—no doubt—but you typically don't see the many loads of dirty laundry, the parents exhausted from chauffeuring their children to sporting events and helping with homework, the worry about a child's ear infection, and the decreased patience they have with their partner. All those elements of parenting don't look quite as exciting, but are very real, and can be stressful for all parent(s).

So, it's very important that you as a parent take good care of yourself. What energizes one parent may not work well for another, so you should experiment with different options. Remember that you're being a good parent by taking time for you! Here are some suggestions that other parents find helpful:

- Make time for regular physical exercise. You can be creative and include your child (on walks to the park), or try to catch a solo workout at the local gym while the kids are in school. Physical exercise is the very best technique for managing your stress.
- Eat a balanced diet, and try to get enough sleep (7-8 hours per night).
- Work to create some “alone” time every day. Perhaps your relatives or friends could assist with childcare to allow for this time in your schedule. Also, establishing (and following) a set bedtime for your children can give you some much-needed alone time and time to share as a couple in the evening.
- Connect with supportive friends and family members. Although exchanging text messages and chatting on Facebook can be great, there's nothing like spending quality time together, even if it's just a short chat over coffee.
- Practice regular relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, prayer/meditation, and muscle relaxation. You may find relaxation audio CDs to be calming as well.
- Be creative about ways you can include your children in the things you love or enjoy. Like cooking? Elementary school kids can work with you in the kitchen and make simple recipes. They can scoop ingredients from one container to another and can be involved in pouring and stirring. Enjoy gardening? Get your child a small shovel to dig with, or have him/her help pick out bulbs. Enjoy reading? Take your kids to the library. There are hundreds of ways to include your children in the things you love.



Part of being a good parent involves knowing when you feel overwhelmed and need a break. What can you do when your stress level is high?

- Ensure that your child is safe, and go into another room for a few minutes to calm down.
- Take a walk or a jog.
- Take several deep breaths.
- Schedule a pleasant activity (for you alone or with your partner/a friend).
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member. Ask for help!
- Remember that this is just a season of your life. While things may feel overwhelming or out of balance right now, it's not always going to be like this.





RECONNECTING WITH YOUR PARTNER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

Just as it's important for parents to take a break from the stress of parenting for "alone" time, it's also vital that you take time to nurture your relationships. As you are adjusting to having your family back together, your relationship with your spouse/partner will need attention, time, and energy. Keeping a relationship strong takes work, and the well-being of your relationship is important for you and your children. That's true whether you and your partner are currently married, single or divorced.

When you're exhausted from caring for your child(ren), it can be easy to neglect these relationships. However, research shows that having people you can count on is important for your physical and mental health.

When encouraged to make time for adult relationships, parents often say, "But we don't have time....we can't afford it...we're too busy!" Guess what? We understand—but we challenge you to be creative. For example, some couples have found these ideas helpful:

- Try Mother's Day Out and meet your partner for lunch.
- Get a babysitter and have an evening out (or maybe try to trade babysitting with another family you know).
- Ask extended family to watch your child(ren) for an evening or maybe even for a get-away weekend for the two of you.
- Commit to spending 10 minutes as a couple every night after you put the kids to bed. Focus this time only on the two of you (not on the kids, bills, schedule, etc.), and use it as a time to re-connect.
- Invite another family over for dinner or go on a picnic together. Your children can play together, and you can enjoy the company of other adults.
- Join a couples' Sunday School class at your church/synagogue/house of worship.
- Join a gym/YWCA (pick one that has good child care) and regularly exercise together.
- Commit to regularly scheduled naps and bedtimes for your children – giving you that time together to share as a couple.

"I'm just excited...I'm ready to start the next chapter of our lives."

Joy Lindgren (whose husband was returning from his third deployment). Slipke (2010)



Tips for Communicating With Your Partner

When a service member comes home, most families are filled with excitement and have high expectations. Often partners have very different expectations of what life will be like. Sometimes, the reality of a homecoming does not exactly meet both partners' expectations.

It is important to talk about the changes that have taken place during this time apart. Spend time talking with each other – you've both been through a lot during the deployment, and you both have changed. Talking openly can help you get to know each other again, regaining the intimacy you shared before and rebuilding family routines.

Some Veterans quickly figure out that the way they talked to others in the military doesn't work very well in family life!

Military communication is often marked by:

Giving orders

Requiring obedience without question

Avoiding emotions (other than anger)

Expecting an immediate response

Such communication does not encourage skills that are essential elements of intimate relationships, such as

Listening

Give and take

Compromise

Negotiation

Consideration of the other's feelings

Expression of vulnerability (sadness and fear)

Comforting your partner

Therefore, you, as a Veteran, may want to reflect on using “home-front” communication skills instead of “military” communication. We expect those close to you will greatly appreciate your efforts, and your relationships will grow closer. Of course, these changes do not happen overnight—you've been gone for many months. However, if you keep these concepts in your mind and work with them, you can improve your communication quite quickly.

You both may find some of these communication skills to be helpful reminders:

- Take turns talking and sharing thoughts and feelings.
- Take responsibility for your own feelings and actions by describing specifically how you feel (such as, “I feel...”, “I’m concerned about...”).

For example, instead of yelling “*You never listen to me!*” you could say, “*I feel frustrated when you text message other people when I’m trying to talk to you.*”

- Listen and avoid interrupting when your partner shares his/her feelings and opinions.
- Don’t assume you know what the other is thinking or feeling.
- Always show respect! If either of you is feeling out of control, take a time-out and return to the discussion at a later, calmer time.





Helpful Strategies for Couples during the Reintegration Process

- Go slowly - don't try to make up for lost time. Be patient with yourself, your partner, and your children. You cannot rush this process.
- Accept that your partner has changed during the time apart. Take time to get to know each other again.
- Keep talking. Talking can help you reconnect as a couple and as a family.
- Discuss what you expect and how you want to handle household responsibilities, parenting responsibilities, and other matters that changed during the deployment(s). Now may be a time to get rid of a chore that you really hate (maybe your partner wouldn't mind mowing the lawn), and you could take over balancing the checkbook. Be flexible!
- Work on skills to deal with painful feelings rather than lashing out. You both may have developed some strong feelings during the deployment, and these may emerge now that the Veteran is home. Check in with yourself if you see this happening. Use healthy ways of managing strong feelings (exercise, journaling, prayer/meditation, etc.), and share your emotions with your partner when both of you are calm.
- Tell your partner how he/she can help you. Be specific. Then, be sure to say THANKS when you notice him/her being supportive.

“Lt. Col John Zenker told the soldiers their mission was almost complete, but first they needed to finish one more step: Reintegrate with their families, friends and jobs... You need to be patient with yourselves and your loved ones”

Slipke, D. (2010, January 10). Oklahoma soldiers rejoin their families, lives. *The Oklahoman*.

For example:

“I need to talk about some things. Do you have some time now to listen?”

“I know you’re trying to be helpful when you give me advice, but I really don’t need that right now. If you could just listen for now, it would mean a lot to me.”

“Thanks so much for taking the kids to the park this afternoon. I really needed some time to myself, and it was great to have some peace and quiet. I enjoyed this evening with you and the kids a lot more because of it!”

- Seek professional help if needed. If your relationship is not improving after a couple of months, you may need help from a professional, preferably one with experience in working with families dealing with deployment.



Special note for family members/friends: Don't force your Veteran to talk about the experience of war, but be open to it if/when the time is right.

If your Veteran does not want to talk about his/her experiences in Iraq/Afghanistan, don't push him/her! It may be helpful for him/her to discuss his/her tough experiences first with a mental health professional or chaplain.

If your Veteran wants to share his/her painful experiences with you, try to listen without judging. The key is to gain your Veteran's trust, so he/she feels that it is safe to talk with you. However, if you become overwhelmed yourself, gently and lovingly tell him/her that you need a break. It may be best for him/her to seek professional assistance at that time.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON ISSUES WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Books School-Age Children Can Read

Deployment

Daddy, You're My Hero! // Mommy, You're My Hero! (2005). M. Ferguson-Cohen. Little Redhaired Girl Publishing.

Uncle Sam's Kids: When Duty Calls. (2003). A. Sportelli-Rehak. Abidenme Books.

Development

On Your Mark, Get Set, Grow!: A "What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Younger Boys. (2008). (also one for younger girls) L. Madaras. Newmarket. [ages 9-12]

The Boys Body Book: Everything You Need to Know for Growing Up You. (2007). K. Dunham. Cider Mill Press. [ages 9-12]

The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls. (1998). V.L. Schaefer. American Girl Publishing.

The Girls Body Book. (2008). K. Dunham. Cider Mill Press. [ages 9-12]

"What's Happening to My Body" Book for Girls (also one for boys) (2007). L. Madaras & A. Madaras. Newmarket. [ages 12-18]

Building Character

Corduroy. (2007). D. Freeman. Penguin Group.

Frog and Toad are Friends. (2006). A. Lobel. Barnes and Noble.

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel. (1939). V.L. Burton. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Stellaluna. (1993). J. Cannon. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

What Do You Stand For? For Kids: A Guide to Building Character (1999). B. A. Lewis. Free Spirit Publishing.

You and Me, Little Bear. (1996). M. Waddell. Candlewick Press.



Books for Parents

The Parents' Guide to Psychological First Aid: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Predictable Life Crises. (2010). G. Koocher & A. LaGreca. Oxford University Press.

How to Discipline Kids Without Losing Their Love and Respect: An Introduction to Love and Logic. (2004). J. Fay. Love & Logic Institute, Inc.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk. (1999). A. Faber & E. Mazlish. HarperCollins Publishers.

Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility. (2006). F. Cline & J. Fay. NavPress Publishing Group.

The Big Book of Parenting Solutions : 101 Answers to Your Everyday Challenges and Wildest Worries. (2009). M. Borba. John Wiley & Sons.

The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child. (2009). A. Kazdin. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12. (2004). T. W. Phelen. ParentMagic, Inc.

Websites

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.healthychildren.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:
www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families

Underage Drinking: Talk Early. Talk Often (How to talk to kids about alcohol):
www.underagedrinking.samhsa.gov

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Child Development:
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/