

Reintegration with Kids

A MILITARY SPOUSE'S BIBLICAL GUIDE TO HELPING THE KIDS THRIVE THROUGH REINTEGRATION

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Like my resource on *Moving with Kids*, I reached out to my military friends to ask their advice on helping kids transition through deployment and reintegration. And they provided a wealth of knowledge that I'm going to impart to you in largely the same way I received it (with some editing support for clarity, grammar, and punctuation).

As you read, you should know that some of the spouses responding below put in a full career with their active duty member and are now retired. Some served on active duty before separating to follow their spouse around the world. Some have served overseas, some have only served stateside. Some have done deployments with little communication and some have been blessed with a lot of it.

More than anything, the women below took time out of their day because they want to help other military spouses. They send you their love and encouragement.

PRE-DEPLOYMENT

The best possible reintegrations for both us and our children start when news of the deployment hits our home. Everyone must get on board, supporting the mission even if we don't like it, encouraging our active duty member even if we hate that he's leaving again.

Most of our warriors turn their hearts toward what they must do in the weeks or months ahead before they ever leave our home. As Kathy, my coauthor on *The Warrior's Bride*, wrote about her husband in *Reintegration: A Military Spouse's Biblical Guide to Surviving After the Homecoming*,

“As he set his purposes toward moving into the deployment, he had to set his face that direction too—and that meant turning from us. He didn't want to leave us, but he knew he had to leave. In many ways, this time of pre-deployment was a season of preparation within his heart to surrender to what the Lord was calling him to. He had to go alone, so he began to move his heart into the place of solitude that it would need to survive over the many months we would be apart.”

That is difficult truth that we need to remember as the next deployment looms. And it's critical that we teach our children what is going on in their heart and mind of their favorite

warrior too. To know that Daddy (or Mommy) must go, but that God already is preparing them for all they will face—it can make all the difference in the world.

In these days of preparation, you also need to prepare your heart and mind for all you will face in the days ahead. Consider whether you think positively or negatively about your spouse, why he's leaving, what he's preparing to do, and what he's asking of you in his absence. Your beliefs about these things will color everything about this deployment, including how well you and your children deal with it.

Even if you can honestly answer those thoughts in the best possible light, you need to remember every day that your attitude matters, both pre-deployment and during deployment. I know that stinks sometimes, but you are, after all, an adult. No, you don't have to pretend to be positive all the time, but you can fight to look for the best in every situation, you can control how busy your calendar is, and you can make taking care of yourself and your family a priority, teaching your children to do the same.

As much as we'd all like some part of the military life to be easy, ease is not to be found in deployment. While I encourage simplicity to maintain your sanity and help regulate your and your children's emotions, it will require a fierce determination in you to frequently say, "No." Have fun, but keep some space in your calendar, in your emotions, and in your mental energy to allow for the unexpected and for plenty of rest.

DURING DEPLOYMENT

My husband deployed twice when our kids were very young. I didn't work outside the home, and we had no activities that tied us down. So I purposely planned a trip to see family in the middle of his time away. The first few weeks we spent adjusting to life without him and looking forward to a trip to visit grandparents. Then when we returned home, we were on the downward side and beginning to get excited about him coming home.

Here are some other tips, tricks, and best advice from other moms who have been there, done that.

Leah, Army

One of the things I did with the kids, especially as they were younger and couldn't grasp time concepts, was to create a paper chain. We each cut out different colors of construction paper and stapled them in rings around each other, forming the chain. I made sure we had enough links for the maximum time Dad would be gone. Each morning, the kids took turns ripping a link off the chain. At first the link wrapped around our living room and down the hall. It was a great visual for the kids to equate the shorter chain with a closer time to his arrival and was also a great thing to point to when they were having a bad day. I could say, "Remember how long this was when we started? Look how much we've taken off already!"

Missy, Air Force

My kids get "Daddy Dolls" when he leaves for trips. [NOTE: One website that offers these is DaddyDolls.com. They offer a military discount through your Family Readiness Group, Family Readiness Center, Ombudsman, etc.] Also, we use one of his gently worn T-shirts for their pillowcases. For the first few days they can snuggle their pillow that smells like Daddy, and

when they look at his shirt it reminds them of him and seems to help. When they are upset they hug it, the closest thing they can get to the real deal.

We make short videos for him to tell him what we miss and want to do with him when he is home. It helps Daddy catch up and stay connected when he's near a computer, and they feel like they are having a special talk with him.

Recently we put together little photo albums for each kid with recent pictures of them with their daddy and put them under their pillows. They can have him close and look at the pictures whenever they want.

Sara, Army

If the technology is available for the deployment, FaceTime is a huge help. When it's not or when she was particularly missing her daddy, my daughter drew pictures for him that we sent in care packages.

Christi, Marines

When our son was young, we had a large world map that we kept in his room. We would put a pin in the area where Dad was deployed. Sometimes we didn't know the exact place so I just put it where I thought he might be. This helped him to understand the idea that Dad was working in another place, not just absent. We would pray at night for Dad to stay safe while he helped to keep the good people in that area safe, and we would have monthly celebrations like a special dinner and a movie, or ice cream or shopping for a new toy—something fun we did not do on a regular basis—to celebrate Dad's good work that month, I always tried to keep it positive, communicating that Dad was helping others to be safe and happy.

When our son would miss Dad, I would let him feel sad. We would talk through his feelings, and I would tell him it was okay to feel that way because that meant he had a lot of love for Dad in his heart. He didn't need to be afraid to talk or cry or feel whatever he felt about it. I would tell him that I felt really sad some days too, and we needed to pray that God would give us strength to be without Dad for a little longer, and give Dad strength to do his job while he missed us.

During sad times, I would also tell our son stories about funny things that happened when he was a baby/toddler and show him pictures of he and Dad doing cute things. Fun stories to help him feel connected to Chris and know his dad loved him. During his preschool & early elementary years, Sam loved hearing stories about himself, and this helped him laugh, getting his mind off of anything negative.

Brittany, Army

I got the kids a Daddy Doll, which they love! They sleep with them and feel closer to him when he is away for school or deployment. I also had my husband record random videos onto my computer as if he were talking to the kids. For example, one video was always of him telling the kids goodnight and that he loved them. Another was greeting them in the morning, and so forth. As they are young, it was an easy way for the kids to be able to see him and hear his voice and feel connected to their daddy.

The kids love to draw pictures and make things to send to Dad when he is away, and they get excited to be a part of picking out goodies to send him. Making a calendar and marking days off each day to help give them a visual. And we always, always pray for Dad at bedtime. Even

though they're young, teaching them to pray for their dad while he is away is huge and reminds them that Dad is looked after by God even if they don't quite understand what that means.

Finally, I try to keep their schedules normal. Routines don't change because Dad is away, and I don't spoil them with lots of extra things simply because he is away. But we do try to find a few fun things to do that aren't necessarily normal for us so that days move forward without them missing him too much.

Christine, Navy

When one of our daughters was seven, she had a very hard time understanding Daddy being gone. We had the blessing of Viber calls often, which helped, but before he left, we filled a large jar full of Hershey kisses, one for every day he'd be gone. Every night after dinner, she faithfully went to the jar and got a kiss from Daddy. That helped with her wondering when Daddy was coming home again and gave them a neat connection point when he returned. Every night for several weeks, she would tell him he had to kiss her.

Danita, Air Force

As our children got older, they had a greater fear that he might not come home. They were beginning to understand war, ISIS, and terrorism, and the fact that some parents don't come home. In these years, the goodbyes were harder, and we faced more tears and harder conversations before and during deployment. We always talked truthfully about life and death, as well as why Dad felt called to serve. This is so important because everyone, including me, needed to know (or be reminded) that if something happened to him, he was doing what he believed God had called him to do. He had peace with his decision, no matter the outcome.

POST DEPLOYMENT

While this is the time period that can be most scary or disappointing, I hope you see from the words above that the foundation for the best possible return is laid during the days before your active duty member leaves and in your attitudes and actions while he is gone.

Even if you didn't do as well as you think you should have during the deployment, be encouraged. As you take the time to allow you spouse to return to the house, rest with him. Work hard for a few days to say no to extended family and friends. Relax, and enjoy being together again as a family.

Leah, Army

When my husband arrived home, I had to really be conscious of 'Dad quiet time' and allow him time to decompress and fully return home to us. I would take the kids to the park or hiking trails to give him a little time to himself. I also learned to not expect him to just jump right back into being Dad. During the deployment, time basically stood still for him when it came to family, but lots of changes occurred in us while he was gone. He did best when we managed our expectations.

Christi, Marines

Before Dad returned home, I would have our son draw welcome home pictures and help me decorate the house. We talked about things he wanted to do with his dad and made a list; however, I told him that we needed to let Dad rest for a few days to get his sleep back to normal first. This helped him regain a connection to his dad and get excited about him coming home, and the rest time after my husband returned home helped them both to reconnect in a relaxed environment before we started doing things as a family again.

Christine, Navy

For our daughter who had trouble with Daddy being gone, reintegration wasn't easy either. We tried to keep schedules as normal as possible for her, but she really just wanted to be near him all the time. When he returned, he only had three days off before he was back to his normal work schedule, but in the evenings and weekends he spent a lot of time with her. He took her on outings with him, ate lunch together, played at the park, and visited the library. Whatever she wanted to do. A few weeks later he got block leave, so we took off to Yosemite to completely get away as a family.

Danita, Air Force

One image that helped us all a lot was to think of our family like a puzzle. Each of us is a piece, and we fit together in a specific way. After deployments, though, the one who was away may be a little different. It doesn't mean the puzzle can't be put back together, but it might look a little different in the end. And that's okay.

When the kids were little and didn't understand time well, I made a point to give my husband time with them first. No matter how much I missed him, I allowed them to have his undivided attention so they could reconnect. It was hard sometimes because a part of me wanted his attention too, but I knew the little ones needed it first. As the years progressed and the kids got bigger, I could pick him up at the airport alone, so we could talk before he saw them. That gave us a short time together before the kids took center stage.

And finally, our daughter wants your children to know that it won't be as scary as they think it will be. Sometimes she was afraid of a strange person coming back into the house, but after a few weeks, everything is normal, like it was before.

Well, there it is! I hope this has been helpful and got your mind thinking through some of the things you can do to make your next deployment the best one ever.

Carrie Daws