Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Tough Topics Series
Learning and Teaching Support

Issue 5

Military Kids, Homecoming & Reunion

Homecomings and reunions are the last stage in the deployment process and is a time of celebration as well as change. Military family members, particularly kids, experience a wide variety of feelings before, during, and after being reunited. All of these feelings are perfectly healthy and normal given the fact they have been separated for several months and have adapted to life without one another. In fact, there are three stages military families experience as a result of the reunion experience and these are as follows: anticipation, readjustment, and stabilization.

Anticipation:

The weeks and days before homecoming and reunion are filled with excitement, nervousness, tension, and relief. During deployment family members have learned to adjust to the absence of the service member one in day-to-day activities. Reuniting again simultaneously brings both joy and anxiety because daily life as a military family is about to change again.

Readjustment:

As anticipation of the homecoming and reunion fades, and the family is reunited once again, daily roles, responsibilities, and rules are renegotiated. Experts have identified two time periods specific to this sometimes challenging stage:

Honeymoon (Usually until the first serious disagreement)

- Feelings of euphoria, relief
- Blur of excitement
- Catching up and sharing experiences
- Beginning to readjust to intimacy

Readjustment (Approximately 6-8 weeks)

- Pressures of daily life intensify
- Sensitivity to service member ones presence
- Increased tension as daily relationships confront reality

Stabilization:

The amount of time it takes families to stabilize during homecoming and reunion varies. Many of them encounter only minor difficulties in adjusting to new routines. For others, however, readjustment may be a longer process that requires additional support. Seeking assistance, if needed, is critical to helping all families navigate homecoming and reunion in a healthy and positive manner.

Kids Reactions to Service Member's Return

Ages	Reactions	Techniques to reconnect
Birth to 1	• Cries • Fusses • Pulls away • Clings to other spouse/caregiver • Has problems with elimination • Changes sleeping and eating habits • Does not recognize service member	• Hold the baby; hug him/her a lot • Bathe and change baby • Feed and play with him/her • Relax and be patient • He/she will warm up in a while
1 to 3	• Shyness • Clinging • Does not recognize service member • Cries • Has temper tantrums • Regresses – no longer toilet trained	• Don't force holding, hugging, kissing • Give them space • Give them time to warm up • Be gentle and fun • Sit, play, and interact at their level
4 to 5	• Demonstrates anger • Acts out to get attention; needs proof you're real • Is demanding • Feels guilty for making service member go away • Talks a lot to bring service member up to date	• Listen to them • Accept their feelings • Play with them • Reinforce that they are loved • Find out the new things in their lives (books, TV, preschool) • He/she will warm up in a while
6 to 12	• Feels he/she isn't good enough • Dreads return because of discipline • Boasts about military parent/loved one	• Review pictures, schoolwork activities, scrap books • Praise what they have accomplished during absence • Try not to criticize • Get involved in their education
13 to 18	• Is excited • Feels guilty because they don't live up to standards • In concerned about rules and responsibilities • Feels too old or is unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent • Is rebellious	• Share what has happened during absence • Listen with undivided attention • Don't be judgmental • Respect privacy and friends • Don't tease about their interests including fashion, music, etc. • Get involved in their education

Tips for Educators

Focus on students and the classroom learning environment – Retain routines and emphasis on the importance of learning while always leaving room to tend to individual student needs.

Provide structure – Maintain predictable schedule with clear behavioral guidelines and consequences to maintain safe and caring classroom. If student is distressed about the family homecoming, find appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs, fears, hopes, and wishes.

Maintain objectivity – Respond in a calm and caring manner to student inquiries and answer questions in simple, direct terms. Regardless of political beliefs, refrain from expressing personal opinions.

Be patient and reduce student workload as needed – Expect temporary slow downs or disruptions in learning when a homecoming and reunion occurs.

Listen – Be approachable, attentive, and sensitive to the unique needs of students coping with homecoming and reunion. Let kids know they can speak individually with you or a school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker about their questions and concerns. Take time to acknowledge the circumstances and answer student questions as needed in a factual manner.

Be sensitive to language and cultural needs – Be aware of, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to the language, values, and beliefs of other cultures in order to assist students and their families appropriately. Inquire about school, community, and military resources available to assist kids and their families in coping in healthy ways.

Acknowledge and validate feelings – Help students develop a realistic understanding of homecoming and reunion. Provide reassurance that their feelings of excitement, joy, nervousness, tension, and relief are normal responses and all individuals and their families adjust to the changes involved with reunion at a different pace.

For more information: http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP, - OSPI, Program Supervisor
Information for this article adapted from Deployment and Reunion Guides for Ages 3-6, 7 to 12, and "Army Brat Pack" for Teens by USARPAC Child and Youth Services and Working with Military Children, A Primer for School Personnel by Virginia Joint Military Family Services Board