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# Returning to Children

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Homecoming is an exciting time, yet can also be very confusing for kids. The following reactions are often observed in children when a parent returns from deployment. Remember, each child is unique. Your child may react differently.

## Toddlers: Ages 1 to 3

### Reactions

- May be shy and clingy.
- May not recognize the returning parent.
- May have temper tantrums.
- May regress with toilet training, sleeping in their own bed, thumb sucking, etc.

### Techniques

- Don't force hugs or play.
- Give them time to warm up; they'll be curious and seek out the returning parent.
- Sit or kneel at their level.
- Snuggle with your partner; your child will soon be in the middle.
- Do daily child related tasks (change diapers, give juice, help at the potty chair, etc.).



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## Preschoolers: Ages 3 to 5

### Reactions

- Will recognize returning parent but may need warm-up time.
- May need "proof" that returning parent is real (poking, playing with eye glasses, etc.).
- May misbehave to get attention.
- May be demanding.

### Techniques

- Listen to what they tell you.
- Accept their feelings. Find out what new things they are interested in (toys, games, TV shows, etc.)
- Ask them to "wait" if they are using attention-getting techniques.
- Play together.
- Do daily child related tasks (put down for nap, take to preschool, help pick up toys, etc.).
- Reinforce your love for your child, even when you don't love his/her behavior.



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## School Age: Ages 5 to 12

### Reactions

- May run down the pier to meet the returning parent.
- May be quiet and reserved initially.
- May feel guilty they weren't "good enough" while the returning parent was away.
- May dread parent's return, fearing they will be disciplined for all the wrongs committed during the deployment.
- May talk nonstop to bring the returning parent up to date.
- May boast about the returning parent and the military.

### Techniques

- Acknowledge and appreciate what they've accomplished during the deployment.
- Spend time reviewing school work, pictures, family scrapbooks, etc.
- Try not to criticize past negative behaviors (poor grades at school, picking on their sibling, etc.).
- Eager to "show off" the returning parent at school or to friends.
- Play together.
- Do chores together.



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## Teenagers: Ages 12 to 18

### Reactions

- May exhibit excitement if parent/teen relationship was strong prior to deployment.
- May feel guilty for not living up to “standards.”
- May be concerned about rules and responsibilities changing.
- May have changed physically.
- May feel “too old” to meet the returning parent.

### Techniques

- Listen with undivided attention.
- Have respect for their privacy and friends.
- Encourage them to share what has happened in their personal life – be careful not to criticize.
- Ask them for updates about current trends, music fashion, etc.



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## Ease Back Into Family Life

### Be Patient

- Go slowly. Don't change rules or routines initially.
- Don't take it personally if your child goes to the parent who did not deploy.

### Discipline

- Approach discipline as a team with your child's other parent.
- Don't punish for behaviors that took place during the deployment.
- Don't give into your child's demands because you feel guilty about being away.

### Get Involved

- Play with your child as it is easier for many children to talk while they are engaged in an activity.
- Help with caretaking. Insist that you can change diapers, drive to ballet practice or help a child get dressed.

### Communicate

- Tell children “thank you” for sending letters, cards, packages or drawings, doing extra chores in your absence, doing well in school, cooperating with their parent.
- Give lots of hugs — even to your teenagers!
- Tell your family how much you love them and how happy you are to be home.

### Get Help

- If you have concerns about your family's adjustment:
- Talk to a guidance counselor at your child's school.
- Contact your child's pediatrician.
- Call your local Fleet and Family Support Center.

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