

Parent/Leader Guide- Reunion

By Kathleen Edick and Paula J. Johnson

A page-by-page guide to help make Reunion following Deployment a time of growth for the entire Family.

(NOTE: for ease of reading "Daddy" is used instead of "Daddy/Mommy".)

A Family is like a Mobile

Consider a mobile: whenever you add a piece or take off a piece, it has to be re-balanced. It swings wildly for a time, before it settles in: each piece balancing in its own space, circling the center. Family is exactly like that and reunion or deployment requires a rebalancing of all the relationships. Take comfort. The upheaval is both normal and necessary. Nothing is wrong, it just has to rebalance and that takes a little time.

"Home is where things get messy— my room, my playhouse, my brother. Sometimes when feelings get messy too, we don't know what to do with each other."

Reunion is messy because human beings are messy -a complex mixture of emotions, beliefs, thoughts and reactions. This book is about the mixed up feelings (both known and unknown) that come along with deployment and reunion. Home, when it is a place of safety, is the best place to sort it all out, where everyone can be themselves and still be loved.

~ *Do you ever have a messy room?*

~ *Can feelings get messy?*

What about those messy feelings? They usually occurs when opposite emotions collide. For example, Excited and Scared or Mad and Sad can often get mixed up together. What happens when we feel both at once? Confusion! Sometimes outbursts, sometimes withdrawal, anger, depression, the list goes on and varies by individual and circumstance. Take some time to think about these questions.

"What other feelings get mixed up together"

"What happens when *they* get mixed up?"

Remember, we are only human. All in one package we are both broken and beautiful. Remembering this helps us give grace to one another as we adjust. Love is patient and kind.

My Daddy serves his country and a soldier must obey. When they said "Come", my Daddy went and he went right away.

There is both honor and grief as we say goodbye to those we love as they leave to serve our country.

Children may wonder, "Can't Daddy get another job?" This opens the opportunity to share the importance of a calling to the Military. (*We Serve Too!—A Child's Deployment Book*, touches more deeply on this topic.) Telling a child why you serve, and why our country depends on you will instill a sense of pride. Help your children know they serve their country too, and the way they serve is by sharing Daddy with their fellow Americans in defense of our nation. A handwritten letter about your job, your calling, your purpose AND your steadfast love for them no matter where you are, can be an anchor for a lifetime for a child who must sacrifice too. Nothing says important like a handwritten letter.

In autumn when they called him and the leaves were crisp and gold, we rushed to cut a Christmas tree and it wasn't even cold!

We opened presents, Santa came, ate by Christmas candle flame, heard the angels news proclaim, but Christmas just was not the same.

This may confuse your child a bit since it is based on a unique experience of author Kathleen Edick's Family. This was something that their family did as their son deployed for the first time. They felt an urgent need to recreate Christmas, to do everything "Christmas" even on a sunny October day so they would not miss Christmas with him that year. To them it said out loud, *"military life is different, but different is OK! And we will celebrate together!"*

Making memories is the key. You can always think outside the box.

On the other hand, this may not be your style. Your family might just like to walk through each holiday as it comes, whether together or not. Make it fit your family, your times, your energy, etc. Play it by ear, be sensitive to each other and don't have unrealistic expectations. Remember, *"Christmas just was not the same..."*

(By the way, on their son's second deployment, the Edick's did not repeat that adventure. Times were different.) The lesson? Stay flexible.

When winter's chill was in the air, Christmas came again. Our quiet little Christmas was lonely without him.

Loneliness is a reality of deployment. No matter what is done to prepare or to keep the contact, loneliness will still be there. Acknowledge with your children that deployment is lonely on both sides. Missing those you love is difficult. Ask your child,

~ *When did you feel most lonely?*

~ *What do you do when you feel lonely?*

This is an opportunity to learn to cope with an emotion that is a common part of human life. Learning to go on, to celebrate even in the midst of loneliness is a good skill to acquire.

At Easter time we hunted eggs and Daddy wasn't there. He missed the day I lost my tooth...And I cried to have him here. And Daddy missed my birthday and the Independence Day parade. He missed my brother's birthday, too, and we missed him when we played.

With little knowledge of clock and calendar, children mark the passing of time with milestones and events in life. Acknowledge these moments with your child.

~ *What things were hard for you during Daddy's deployment?*

~ *What things did we miss doing together?*

~ *Were any of them the same things as the children in the book?*

~ *What things did we do that they didn't do?*

Listen and ask questions about those things. This might be a good time to go through The Homecoming Box™. Maybe especially painful memories can be put away in a Tear Bottle™ to make sure the sad feelings are validated but not revisited more than necessary.

Here is an opportunity to teach about choosing to live happily in the present moment.

The Homecoming Box™, and Tear Bottle™, used during and following deployment, can really help address these lost times and create a healing place. Instructions for both of these are found here on the Parent/Leader page of our website.

And then the leaves began to turn! Hey! Daddy's coming home! Let's clean the house! Let's bake a cake! How Mama's smile shone!

Celebration is a uniquely human experience! Talk about the invitation of welcoming someone home!

- ~ *What things did you do or would you like to do to welcome Daddy home?*
- ~ *What do you think it will be like when he comes home?*
- ~ *What things would make someone feel welcomed?*
- ~ *How would you like to be welcomed, if you had been gone for awhile?*
- ~ *What feelings (any feelings) did you have when you heard your Daddy's coming home?*

All feelings are fine. Be genuine with whatever they are.

"Welcome Home!" our banner said. We stretched our necks. I turned my head. My Mom saw Daddy up ahead, ran to him and...cried instead?

This sentence in the book brings a smile to the adults who know strong emotions and release of tension often come out as tears. Children may wonder, as the child in the book does, about the perceived contradiction! Seeing a parent cry can be very unsettling for a child. Teach them about happy tears and reassure them that everything is fine. They may experience unexpected tears as their own pent-up emotions are released. Adults may be unaware of the tension and burden being carried by a child until upon seeing a parent arrive safely home, they become overwhelmed with tears, too.

However, most children when they are young, experience tension that comes out as fidgeting, acting-out behavior, loud voices and attention getting antics. Be prepared for anything. Some children may be shy, hide their face in Mama's shoulder, they may withdraw from the returning parent. Remember that children are a barometer of emotion in the adults around which may result in some unattractive behavior! The withdrawal of a child or an angry response feels terrible to the parent who expects a wonderful reunion!

Remember, children are just learning to handle their emotions. Give them time, they will warm up and be happy you are back!

OH! It's fun having daddy back home in the daytime, to ride on his shoulders and rough-house at playtime. Daddy's strong arms throw us high in the air! Mom's not too sure-I think she gets a scare!

Talk with the child about the wonderful things about having Daddy home.

- ~ *Isn't it great to have Daddy back to horse around with him?*

Discuss how special the returning parent is, and the unique place he holds in the child's heart.

- ~ *There's just no one like Daddy, is there?*
- ~ *I can see you are glad Daddy's back!*

Note to the parent who has been home: Even if the rough housing and horseplay does scare you a bit, remember that children love it, and need it. The way they connect to each parent is different, so as long as things are in fun, let it happen. If you have trouble stepping away, go find something to do that takes you out of the mix for awhile!

For the returning parent: You may not feel up to all the play your child wants when you return. Children really do see time with them as love. They will want every waking hour with you. Realize this hole is humanly impossible to fill. It's ok to put limits on time together.

Be honest with the children and give some expectation of when you will be able to spend time together, understanding that "time together" does not only mean playing together or being

entertained. The best play for children is working with their parents. It's ok to say something like this:

~ Daddy needs to be alone and rest, now. Will you help me in the garage after your nap?

We both take our baths and get ready for bed, wait for our story but Dad reads instead?

The parent who has been home needs to step back (this is not easy!) and allow the parent who has been away to handle some of the everyday needs of the child in order to reconnect and re-establish the parental security and authority. If they protest that Dad is reading to them instead of Mom, do not give in to them; let them know that both parents are capable of doing things for them. Reassure them that it will just take time to readjust.

~ Your Daddy's been reading ever since he was a little boy and he wants to read to you tonight. You need to pay attention and let him read, ok?

Sometimes now Mama doesn't seem to hear me. She's sitting by daddy as close as can be! My rooms getting messy, my feelings are, too. I think time with my Mama is long overdue!

The marriage relationship must be a priority.

Let the children know it is good for Families if Mommy and Daddy take time as a couple. Remember...what is good for the Family is good for the children.

Children also may not understand the returning parent has other relationships! Make sure they know you will be spending time with others, too, and it does not change your love for them. You may need to explain, that because you have been gone awhile, others (parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends, etc.) will all want some time to re-connect, too.

When you see jealousy rising, you can ask them,

~ Are you feeling left out?

~ Are you feeling that you are not getting enough attention?

Reassure your children they are still your precious ones, and you will make time for them too, and then follow through consistently so they know it's worth the wait. Once again, the easiest way to include them is in the everyday things you do. Remember how kids spell love: t-i-m-e.

We start to make lunch and I want what I said, "Chips between butter", I mutter, "AND BREAD!" "NO," Daddy said, "something healthy instead."

Oh the mad's coming up and my face is all red. Hot messy feelings swarm round in my head! Like a sudden attack of a mad hornet's nest, they fly through my mouth; I cry, shout and protest!

The conflict is not about bread and chips. It is about grief and anger that's been pent-up for months. It's about fear of re-attaching for fear of being left again, or it may be just about the "I wants".

Remember the mobile illustration, when you first hang it, or when you add or take-away a piece, all the little hanging things swing wildly around until it sets itself right and begins to settle down, each piece gently moving within its balanced place.

This page is mostly wild swinging!

You can't tell me what to do! You weren't even here! When we opened our presents, rang in the New Year, You weren't here on Easter! You missed hunting eggs, when I fell down and bugged up both of my legs. You weren't even here when I lost my first tooth! You're not the boss of me! That is the truth!

When you are little you do not have power. This little girl's grief and anger has overwhelmed her fear of authority and she has become her own "Little Emperor", accountable to no one but herself -for a moment. Some children will not come to a "blow up point" like this, but may instead hold and hide the pain. Being quiet does not mean that they are not having these feelings or resentments. Maybe they will share them with you if you ask,

~ *Do you ever think the things that little girl is saying?*

Lost times of togetherness create losses that need to be grieved, released, and placed behind. Let children grieve, but don't let them nurse these wounds (either real or imagined) and amplify them beyond their legitimate value. The Tear Bottle™ is a good tool to use here.

As you hear the pain your child experienced due to your absence, you may find yourself struggling with guilt. Let that go. You had (have) a job to do, and you did (are doing) it. Military children can be as well adjusted as any other children if you guide them through these rough waters. **Listen;** hear what the child is really saying.

Perhaps it is hard to let you again be the authority in their life. What if you go away again? Acknowledge this as reality of Military life, but matter-of-factly let them know that you are the parent *from wherever you are*, and that does not change.

Children are resilient and may begin to depend on themselves in hard times. The good news is that if you assert your parental authority (though you may get some initial resistance) you will give your child a gift of security! A child, who knows their parent is in charge, is a child who is allowed to be a child. They will be happier and more secure if you relieve them of the responsibilities of being their own authority. Short, simple and calm answers and actions will let them know you are the one in charge.

A Word About Guilt:

False guilt is destructive and can lead to over-indulgence of a child in an attempt to compensate for a perceived failure. It also gives power to the child to manipulate the parent by playing on their feelings of guilt. These reactions to false guilt are not good for children.

Genuine guilt, however, should not be ignored, but dealt with systematically through acknowledging the wrong, through forgiveness, and through a commitment to restoration. Beware of the temptation to unburden yourself of guilt by unloading it on the one wronged. Protect your children as you work through your own guilt/redemption journey. They will benefit as you heal without being burdened with things they cannot understand nor fix.

Faith can be very helpful in resolving guilt of either kind. You may want to seek the advice and counsel of your Chaplain, or other clergy in your area.

uh...oh

Before you turn the page, stop and be silent; experience the drama. Then ask your children,

~ *What do you think is going to happen now?*

~ *Do you think there are things she wished she hadn't said?*

This may give you some interesting information.

At times we all long to trust in someone larger and wiser than ourselves. For a child, that is usually the parents. This child has now realized that she has most likely angered that bigger and more powerful person, and wonders what will happen to her now. She understands she deserves to be punished and has remorse at her outburst and now recognizes her lack of power.

A child may find it scary to think of being corrected by a parent they have not been with for awhile. This cannot stop you from being a parent and disciplining your child. To give it over to the parent who has been home, only prolongs the time when the child accepts your authority again.

Things got very quiet, Dad rose to a stand. And slowly but surely took me by the hand. We walked down the hall to my naughty chair...but he knelt by me softly and smoothed back my hair.

This is a tender moment in the book. Children, who think she should get in trouble, see that the father knows there is more to this than just a haughty tirade. Children long for these moments when they are loved in this way. Ask them,

~ *Is the Daddy angry?"*

~ *Why not?*

It is comforting to children to know an adult can see past the naughtiness to the heart of the matter. As tempting as it may be to react with hurt and anger at a defiant child, gentle firmness is far more effective. The child learns her father is in control of his own emotions (which already elevates him above her) and wisely sees that she needs his love (and protection from herself and her out-of-control emotions), but not his indulgence.

This Dad is modeling the grace for which we all long, while re-establishing his authority in gentle attitudes and firm quiet actions. Undeserved pardon warms our hearts and lets us know we are loved and cherished, even when our hearts are dark and angry.

You don't seem to know where your ol' man fits in. I struggle myself with that time and again.

Often after deployment the parent feels that they do not know how to fit in, or where they fit in. Admitting this is helpful since everyone else in the family feels it, too. Tell them some things about being gone. You do not need to give too much information. But some things children might like to know would be as follows:

~ *Who were your friends?*

~ *How was it different to be with them eating dinner, than it is with us?*

~ *Was it ever hard for you to fit in there?*

~ *What did you do for fun?*

~ *How did you spend your off duty time?*

Do not share things that will bring up fears for your child if and when you are deployed again. Be sensitive to that possibility, but share the everyday simple things that can help your child see they are not the only one swinging wildly in that mobile, called family!

You may need to tell them something about your own struggles to fit back in.

"But respect is the glue that will keep us together." He said, "We need patience." (Then he hung up my sweater)

Respect and Patience.

Respect is at the foundation of love and patience builds the house. Respect must be shown to each person throughout post deployment times, while working to put the family back together. Love expressed through patience and respect is like glue, bonding individuals into a Family unit. Remember nearly all adhesives need time to set up—just hold it in place, be still, be patient and you will get a stronger bond!

Here's an interesting side note: did you know that the human body has glue that literally holds us together? It is called laminin. Check it out on the internet or a medical book. It might be a useful word picture for you to use with your children.

We all need some time for our family to mend, but I promise you things will get better again. I was not here for Christmas, it broke my heart too. (He picked up Ted Teddy and matched a lone shoe.) But our country called me and it hurt little dear, to know I would be gone when you needed me here.

Let children know there is a bigger picture. You are serving your country and though you wanted to be there, your job is important for the Family (it is how they get what they need), for the people of the country where you deployed (you protect and defend people wherever you serve), and for our country (this nation cannot maintain its freedom without you).

It is important to let children know you did miss them and the pain of separation is not only theirs, but yours too. This is a sacrifice you all make as a family. You might promise each other you won't indulge in self pity and resentment. Make a team pact. Use this teachable moment to train them to think outside themselves toward the needs of others too.

Discuss "mending", what it means and some ways that your family can mend. Incorporate your ideas naturally into your daily living as much as possible. As you model "ok-ness", they will be "ok", too.

There is an old adage that says, "A Family that prays together— stays together." Daily devotions or Family prayers at bedtime or meals are a very, calming and unifying place to be together as a Family. Many ministries to Military Families have materials to help your Family grow together in faith. You can find Military Ministries links at www.weservetoo.com.

Your sacrifice is real sweet one, and more than most you understand how much it costs to keep us free. (He put my crayons in their can.)

In the picture the father is thinking of the sacrifice his children make, talk with children about what they see in the picture (not just their sacrifice but the dad's as well).

- ~ What is a sacrifice?
- ~ What does the father mean, and how are those children making a sacrifice?
- ~ Did you know that you make a sacrifice for our country by being a military child?
- ~ Were you lonely when your parent was away?
- ~ What other sacrifices were made?

Sacrifice is not just about pain, it is also about a worthy cause, an honorable pursuit for that which is of great value. If something is important, it is worth the price of pain. There is honor in that. Help children to feel the purpose in their sacrifice, and the importance of their vital role in of your Military Family.

But when I was so far away, I thought of you each day. I knew you lost your first front tooth. (He put my blocks away) He pulled a ragged paper from the pocket of his pants; it was worn and torn and tattered but it only took one glance... I recognized that paper, I drew it! (It's the truth!) I sent it to him when he was gone...it was *ME!*—without my tooth!

Parents love their children no matter how far away they are. Parents, if you have saved something your child sent to you while you were deployed, make sure to show it to them! This makes the connection for them that you really did receive their gifts and were still part of their life, though far away. These gifts become "stones of remembrance" a way of treasuring the precious gifts a child brings. To adults, a ragged picture, a small stone, a shiny trinket, may not mean much until you consider the love a little heart has attached to it, just for you.

There is a story about a busy father who found a box in his office. When he looked inside, it looked like trash to him, so of course, he threw it away. When his little daughter asked him for the box, he said he had thrown it away.

With tears she told him, " *That was all my best stuff!*"

(He bent down and picked up my blue bouncy ball.) Then he bounced it smack into my blue bedroom wall! We bounced back last time, he said with a wink, we'll bounce back again and again don't you think? Our family's a tough, squishy, rubbery ball. You can't keep us flat--we bounce back! That is all!

Deployment and Reunion are cycles for the military Family. For most, it will happen many times. The ball demonstrates that though things are hard, we can come back and will even get stronger and stronger. You may want to use a ball, a rubber band or anything that bounces back and make it your own symbol for "resiliency". At a difficult moment, a rubber band, brought out of the pocket in silent stretching and releasing may do more than words to remind you all of you that the strain is temporary and your resiliency will see you through. You will "bounce back"

A cheerful sense of humor will make the hard things easier especially when kids know you are all in this together.

**Yep...Home is where things get messy— my room, my playhouse, my brother!
But home is where things get straightened up too, when we bounce back and hold on to each other.**

Holding on is the key. Don't let the ups and downs get to you; they are a normal part of the reunion experience (and of life in general). Do not judge your progress by other Families; yours is unique and will settle down in your own way. Respect for each other and patience really will help you get through the rough patches.

A Family is a commitment—a commitment to each other through the good and the bad. Commitment is not easy, but you are a resilient Military Family, a team, and you *will* make it.

Hey Dad! I think I have another loose tooth!

This little statement says many things:

- The Family ties have been restrung,
- We are all finally home together, *and*
- You are just my Dad again.

Have courage. Things *will* become routine and comfortable again. Your family bonds will be stronger than ever if you persevere.

Parenthood is a wonderful journey. Enjoy it fully!

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