

Children's Reaction to Soldier's Return

Reactions	Techniques
Birth to 1 Year	
Cries Fusses Pulls away from you Clings to spouse or caregiver Has problems with elimination Changes their sleeping and eating habits Does not recognize you	Hold the baby, and hug him/her a lot. Bathe and change your baby; feed and play with him/her. Relax and be patient; he/she will warm up to you after a while.
1 to 3 Years	
Shyness Clinging Does not recognize you 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 at their level.
3 to 5 Years	
Demonstrates anger Acts out to get your attention; needs proof that you're real Is demanding Feels guilty for making the parent go away Talks a lot to bring you up to date	Listen to them. Accept their feelings. Play with them. Reinforce that you love them. Find out the new things on TV, at preschool, books.
5 to 12 Years	
Isn't good enough Dreads your return because of discipline Boasts about Army and parent	Review pictures, schoolwork, activities, scrap books. Praise what they have done. Try not to criticize.
13 to 18 Years	
Is excited Feels guilty because they don't live up to standards Is concerned about rules and responsibilities Feels too old or is unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent Is rebellious	Share what has happened with you. Listen with undivided attention. Don't be judgmental. Respect privacy and friends. Don't tease about fashion, music.

The Children Also Serve

Before One Parent Goes Away

An extended separation can be emotionally challenging for those left behind—and especially for children. Children’s reactions will vary with their personalities, ages, and coping skills.

When parents begin the busy and detailed preparations for an extended separation, the child sees and feels the tension as well. As everyone focuses on the separation, the child may feel left out. The following are some examples of what you might expect:



- # Sadness,
- # Fear,
- # Resentment,
- # Loneliness even before parent leaves,
- # Feelings that the parent is going away because the child has been bad,
- # Feelings that the parent is leaving because he/she does not love the child anymore,
- # Angry outbursts mixed with clinging behaviors,
- # Regressive behaviors,
- # Attention-seeking behaviors, and
- # Psychological distancing.

Suggestions for the Parent Who Is Leaving

- # Spend time explaining the separation at the child’s level: where, with whom, for how long, etc.
- # Sit down with the entire family and talk about it.
- # Let each family member express how he or she feels.
- # Establish rules/limits before the separation.
- # Let older children relate past separation experiences to younger children.
- # Use maps, calendars, paper chains, etc., to help children visualize the location and length of deployment.
- # Take a picture of each child with the separating parent, and give it to the child.
- # Meet with each child individually; discuss and accept the child’s feelings.
- # Ask the child to assist with packing.

- # Videotape or tape record the separating parent reading bedtime stories to be played while the parent is gone.
- # Give each child a comfort item—something of yours (t-shirt, ball cap, pillowcase, etc.).
- # Visit the child's school and talk to the teachers; leave envelopes to be mailed with the child's schoolwork, newsletters, etc.
- # Give each child an empty scrapbook to build with letters, pictures, etc., during the separation.

How the Parents Can Help

Children experiencing military separations can behave in ways similar to children of divorce. However, the most influential factor-affecting children is the remaining parent's attitude about the separation. If the remaining parent maintains a positive attitude and models effective coping skills, the child will most likely do the same. Children will worry about many things or exhibit different behaviors, which may include:



- # Worry about family and finances;
- # Fear that the separation is permanent;
- # Feelings of abandonment;
- # Complaints about stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, and other illnesses;
- # Increased irritability, crabbiness, or moodiness;
- # Eating or sleeping difficulties;
- # Swings from very responsible to very irresponsible;
- # Increased acts of aggression toward people and things;
- # School problems, such as a drop in grades, unwillingness to attend school, or odd complaints about school;
- # Nightmares;
- # Withdrawal from family or friends; and/or
- # Wanting to sleep in the parents' bed

Accept some regressive behavior, but don't let your children use it as an excuse. Continue to make them responsible for household chores and schoolwork. Let the children know they are making a valuable contribution. Also let them know that it is okay to be sad, but teach them how to recover and move on.

Suggestions for the Parent at Home

- # Talk about the separated parent daily.

- # Leave lots of pictures of the deployed parent at the child's eye level.
- # Have a box of the parent's clothing available for dress up.
- # Try to keep household routines/rules the same.
- # Maintain a scrapbook of pictures, letters, etc.
- # Discipline consistently. (Don't say, "Wait 'til your father gets home." This could make the child dread the soldier's return.)
- # Encourage children to stay in contact with their parent through e-mail, letters, packages, video, phone calls, and audio messages.
- # Keep a calendar to record the passage of time and special events, or use other ways to show the time passing (jelly beans in a jar, paper chains, maintaining a journal, etc.).

Suggestions for the Separated Parent

- # Become a pen pal to your child's class—send souvenirs, postcards, maps, stamps etc., to share with the class.
- # Send a recipe to your child to make when you return.
- # Send a drawing with a hidden picture.
- # Write to each child individually.
- # Send small items that fit into regular envelopes: gum, baseball cards, stickers, gift certificates, coloring books, and balloons.
- # Put a personal ad in the newspaper's classified section for the children to find.
- # Remember birthdays and other special days with letters, cards, or small gifts.
- # Tell your child often, "I love you" and "I miss you."
- # Play games through the mail like tic-tac-toe or hangman.
- # Keep a copy of the child's schedule for sports events, school programs, field trips, and other events to talk about with your child.