



A Special
Magazine for
Parents and
Caregivers

talk, listen,



» Deployments

Dealing With Comings and Goings

» Homecomings

Encouraging Children to
Express Themselves

» Changes

Adjusting to the "New Normal"





Talk, Listen, Connect In recognition of the contributions made by the United States Armed Forces – the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, National Guard and Reserves –

Sesame Workshop presents “Talk, Listen, Connect: Deployments, Homecomings, Changes,” a bilingual educational outreach initiative designed for military families and their young children to share.

We are proud to offer support to help military families as they face challenging transitions.

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Family Matters

Military families such as yours are extraordinarily dedicated, strong, and resilient. You have to be, for you face extraordinary challenges. You may be part of a military community or you may be living in the community at-large. However, service members and their families have one thing in common: All are performing a selfless service on our country's behalf.

As members of a military family dealing with long periods of separation, your children are going to need lots of love and reassurance. In the event of multiple deployments, your family will be going through the process more than once. Multiple deployments, so frequent these days, carry with them the need for continual adjustments, requiring special effort and teamwork. There is a way to meet these unusual demands, to use them » » »



as an opportunity to feel pride and to grow closer and stronger. With the whole family working together, children can feel nurtured and more secure.

You and everyone in your family are heroes: by making the deployed parent's service possible, by persevering at home, and by rallying around the returned service member when the time comes. To help you manage, Sesame Street is offering *Talk, Listen, Connect: Deployments, Homecomings, Changes*. In this special magazine, you'll find information and ideas about:

- » **Deployments:** to help you cope with pre-deployments, deployments, adjusting, and staying connected.
- » **Homecomings:** to make reunions go as smoothly as possible, with ideas on how to deal with multiple deployments and homecomings.

In addition to being home, the returning service member may have other situations to deal with: physical or emotional injuries, or a combination of both. For this reason we offer:

- » **Changes:** to help you and your family stay connected and hopeful as you establish a "new normal."

As always, you are the expert! From the sections that you need, choose the ideas that suit your situation. They'll provide a helpful starting place as you and your family explore ways to manage these transitions.





Deployments: Creating Connections

When a parent is called to serve, your whole family must adjust to many new experiences, the first of which are the different stages of pre-deployments and deployments. As you try these suggested ideas, note the ones that work for your family so you can use them again as the need arises.

During Pre-Deployments

The period of time before the service member leaves may cause anxiety in children and family. Advance planning, along with a big dose of reassurance, will go a long way in helping everyone navigate through it. When a parent is being deployed, there will be some bumps, but as always, the key is working together and communicating fully. Here are some ideas to get you started:

» Prepare and plan together.

Let caregivers and key people know that a parent is leaving. Start a support system of people you'll be counting on for help. Inform anyone involved in your child's care.

» Keep family connections strong.

Create a "thinking of you" item such as a "hug-me" pillow: Stuff one of the service member's T-shirts and sew it closed. When your child feels the need, he can wrap himself in a hug!



Express Yourself!

» **Children often have a hard time expressing their emotions.**

From pre-deployments through homecomings and long afterward, it's important to encourage your child to let you know how he is feeling – with words, faces, drawings, and questions. Then you can better help him adjust. Let him know that it's OK to feel all the ways he's feeling. Reassure him: "I'll be here for you."

- » **If you have more than one child, don't be surprised if each reacts differently to the coming deployments.** Encourage older children to help out; make sure they know they're part of the team. For example, the older child can say, "Let's draw a picture for Mom. Then we'll show it to Dad and he can help us send it to her." But of course, as the parent, you'll want to make sure older children know that they should share their worries and concerns with you, too, just as the younger ones do.



If your child doesn't bring up questions

about the deployment, you should feel free to do so. With no discussion, a young child may imagine something worse.

Remind him: "Your mom (or dad) is very prepared. She knows how to do her job well, and she is not alone. She is working with others who also do their

jobs well." Assure your child that you will continue your regular activities, such as bedtime stories, play dates, or family dinners.

- » **Don't be timid about reaching out and getting assistance from others.** It's OK to seek counseling if you need it – anonymously, if you prefer.

During Deployments

Things change again once a parent has been deployed. You may have to rethink the way things are done at home. You'll find yourself beginning to create new routines and adjust to the different circumstances. But your family will adjust – and deservedly take pride in doing so.

- » **Be careful with news of the war that comes in over the TV, radio, the Internet, and phone.** Your child may hear things even when you don't realize she's listening. Communicate this to relatives and to friends when you visit their homes.
- » **Reassure your child by keeping connected to the deployed parent** with e-mails, phone calls, photos, and drawings. Your little one can even say good night to Mom by the moon at a prearranged time every night. She'll know that her parent is saying good night, too – far away, by the same moon.



- » **Stick to routines as much as possible; they'll help your child feel secure. As time goes on and she feels more comfortable, ask her to help you create new family routines, such as Backward Day (try eggs for lunch, sandwiches for breakfast).**
- » **Right from the start, leave the homecoming date as open-ended as possible** while giving your child something hopeful to hang on to: "Dad (or Mom) will be home as soon as his job is finished." Help your child keep track of the days Dad is away. For example, start a paper chain and add a colorful link each day, to be presented to him or used as a decoration at homecomings. Or put a penny in a jar for each additional day. When Dad returns, your child can use the money to buy something special for him.



Take care of the caretaker! By keeping yourself physically healthy, you'll keep yourself emotionally healthy, too. Eat (and serve) good foods to feel your best. Include physical activity in your routines: a family walk, a game of tag, or dancing to favorite tunes. And get plenty of sleep; you'll be surprised how much difference it makes.



Involve your child in planning and making something special for homecomings, such as a "Welcome Home" banner or a cake.

Homecomings: Together Again



This day may be the result of weeks of preparing, and the full homecoming experience may last for some time afterward. As with any highly anticipated event, the reality may be different

from your family's expectations. Of course, having your loved one back is wonderful, but it's also one more transition. Your child will continue to need your special support to deal with any difficulties. With advance planning, you can prepare your child for the joys – and sometimes the difficulties – of having his family together again.

Reconnecting

Remember, even a few months is a long period of time as a child grows and develops. There's no need to rush. Relationships have changed; family members have grown emotionally and, for children, physically, too. Remind your child that change helps families become stronger.

- » **Talk with your child beforehand about what to expect.** Point out that just as he's changed over the last few months, so has his returning parent: Your child may have grown an inch, tried a new food, learned to say his ABCs. The parent who's coming back may have been to a new place, been in difficult situations, and also learned new things.



Take it slow; be patient. If your child is shy at the initial reunion, you can set the example. Let him see Mom and Dad hug. Let him set a comfortable timetable for reconnecting.

- » **Routines will need to be readjusted.** Introduce changes slowly. Little by little, you'll have to learn how to be a team again.
- » **Remind your child that he is loved** – softly, loudly, daily. Hugs help, too!



Multiple Homecomings

Service members today may be redeployed with more frequency and for longer periods of time. In reality, the whole family is being redeployed! For a young child, multiple homecomings mean constant adjustments. She may also find it difficult to reconnect in a loving, trusting relationship if she knows the parent may be leaving again.

» **Stress that deployments are part of the parent's job.** Reassure your child – as many times as needed – that the redeployment is not because of anything she did or said.

» **Take advantage of pre-deployment briefings** each time the service member leaves for a tour of duty. Not only does the briefing provide and reinforce important information, it also helps get everyone involved again and working as a team.

» **It's important not to say anything about redeployment until orders are in hand** and there are visible signs – such as Mom packing – that something is happening.

» **If you have more than one child, make time for each,** doing something as simple as reading together or going to the park to play. You will send an important message: “You matter!” Since time is always an issue, invite other family members to join in. Older children can also keep younger ones company and be terrific role models – but make sure you let them just be kids, too.



Use the previous deployment as a model. Remind

your child, “Remember when Dad went away last time? It was hard, but we pulled together as a family – and we will again.” Go back to the ideas and strategies that worked before, and to the people you depended on. But stay flexible, too; each deployment is different.

Before, during, and after homecoming, your child will continue to need your special support. Remember to talk, listen, and connect! You’ll appreciate the joys and work through the challenges together – as a loving family.





Express Yourself: Questions & Answers

Your child is going to have a lot of questions. Listen to what she is asking, then answer as directly and simply as possible. Try to resist saying “don’t feel bad,” or “don’t cry.” What is probably most important to your child is for you to hear her out. And don’t be surprised if you have to answer the same questions over and over again. Here are a few of the most common:

- » **When is Dad coming home? (Or why can’t he come home now?)** “Dad will be home when his job is finished. He loves us all very much and can’t wait to be with us again.”
- » **How come Mom has to go away again but my friend Alex’s mom doesn’t have to go away at all?** “Everyone has a different job; your mom’s job is one that needs to be done in another country (or a place far away).”
- » **Is Dad leaving because he is angry at me?** “No. Dad may be frustrated or tired, but he is not angry with you. He loves you.”





Changes: The “New Normal”

Deployments bring changes to every member of the family. This is especially true when a service member returns due to injury. The injury may be physical or emotional or a combination of both. Suddenly everything that was normal before has changed. Nothing can be as unsettling for the family and especially for a child whose questions may not have immediate answers.

Because things are constantly changing – and challenging – approach these changes in small steps as the returning parent and the whole family go through the various stages of coping with the “new normal.”

Crisis and Stabilization

The more the family rallies round, the better the parent who is either physically or emotionally injured, or both, may do. And even when the outcome is unknown and reassurance is hard to give, your child needs to be offered the chance to be hopeful.

♥ **There may be very little information available at first.**

Don't give false assurances if you don't know – but do be reassuring: “Mom has been injured. The good thing is that she's at a hospital now with doctors who know how to take care of her. They are working hard to help her get better.”

♥ **Do your best to manage your own anxiety and to protect your child from information he doesn't need.**

Think through what you're going to say to him before you say it as well as what you're going to say during family phone calls. It might help to talk with a friend, parent, advisor, doctor, or clergyperson.

♥ **There will be difficult decisions to make.**

Whatever you decide, prepare your child and, as always, be reassuring. You can say, “I'm going to see Dad to see how I can help. You'll be staying with Grandma (or in military housing near the hospital, or whatever arrangements you've made). And remember, we all love you!”



Routines are still important! Wherever

your child will be, try to make sure that at least some familiar routines are followed. Bring a beloved object, such as a favorite blanket or toy. This will give him a greater sense of security. Remember to assure your child that his parent's injury is not his or anyone's fault. It can happen with this kind of job.





To many young children, time and attention equal love, pure and simple.

Give your child as much time as possible, under the circumstances. If you're away, phone often. You can e-mail photos of yourself, the recuperating parent (if appropriate), the doctors, and the hospital building. Listen to your child's worries – and also to his everyday news.

♥ **As time passes, keep communication going,** updating as appropriate. Although it's important to be careful with the amount of information you offer your child, do try to talk with him about what is happening. Remember, your young one's imagination will fill in any vacuum, and that may be far worse. Offer hope: "It may take a while before we know everything, but our family will get through this together."



Even if your child can't yet visit the injured parent, he can draw pictures to hang up, offer a stuffed animal to put on the hospital bed, or record a song to share.

♥ **Consult with medical and support staff about the appropriate time for your child to see his injured parent.** This will depend on his developmental level and emotional maturity. Get help on how to prepare your child for his parent's appearance. He will need to know in advance about tubes, machines, bandages, and so forth, as well as the fact that there will be other injured service members nearby. The recuperating parent may look and/or act very different from the one he remembers.

♥ **If a visit is appropriate, don't force touches and hugs,** which may be scary at first. Let your child set a comfortable pace.





Invisible Injuries

Invisible injuries are the hardest injuries for children to understand.

Why does a parent seem angry? Or sad?

Why does he forget things or just seem “out of it”? It’s crucial to find a way to explain these changes to your children in ways they can understand.

- » **You can explain that sometimes injuries are invisible, the way a stomachache is:** The hurt is inside. When you look at the person, you can’t see the hurt inside, but it is there. Help your child understand that the injury may change the way his injured parent feels, talks, and acts. Everything from forgetfulness to anger and frustration to sleepiness can be symptoms of this invisible injury.
- » **Praise your child’s strength, bravery, and helpfulness,** but let him express his fears, too.
- » **You may also need to explain a parent’s immobility or nonresponsiveness:** “The doctors want Dad to rest,” or “This medicine helps Dad get well, but it also makes him sleepy.”
- » **Validate your child’s confusion, and make sure that he knows he is not to blame.** For example, you can say, “I know Mom isn’t smiling as much, but she still loves you.”

Rehabilitation

Once the service member is stable and starting the recovery process, new issues will arise. Help your child understand that this can be a long process. Say, “It’s a long road, but we’ll get through it, one step at a time.”

♥ **Encourage your child to ask questions about the injury:** “Does it hurt?” “Are you a robot with superpowers (in the case of a prosthetic device)?” “Will Dad always have trouble talking or remembering things?” “Will a new leg grow back?” Show her how the prosthesis or wheelchair works. Most children are curious and adaptable. Take advantage of that quality!

♥ **Your child may ask, “Is Mom going to get better?”** You can say, “Some very good doctors are working hard to help her get better. You’re helping, too! It’s going to take some time and some hard work, and we may need to learn to do some things a new way. But we’ll all work together as a family.”

♥ **Try to find a happy medium between protecting your child and acknowledging the difficult reality of what she is experiencing.** “Yes, your dad is different, but he’s still Dad. He still loves you.” Acknowledge what’s changed, but also stress what’s stayed the same. Remind your child: “We were a strong family before, and we’ll be a strong family again. We’ll all heal together.”



Let your child help with therapy! Even the youngest may be able to offer a sip of water or clap for a first step taken. She can decorate a prosthetic with photos or add a personalized plate to a wheelchair: “Mom on Wheels!” By drawing colorful signs to label objects or illustrate short phrases, your child can help Dad communicate or remember important words. Getting your child involved may ease her fears while helping her reconnect with the parent who is injured.

♥ **Give your child a “kissing hand.”** Kiss the center of her palm and enfold it. Tell the child the kiss will stick, even when it’s washed. When she puts her hand to her cheek, the kiss will spread love all through her body, reminding her she’s loved – and that will never change.

Express Yourself: Signs of Stress



» Children may sometimes express themselves not in words but in behavior. Each child may react to stress and sadness differently. Be aware of changes, and be sure to get counseling if it's needed. Some signs your child may need help handling things: acting out, being extra clingy, being withdrawn or overly active, experiencing nightmares or sleeplessness, and losing developmental milestones (such as bathroom skills). And if your child is anxious about going to school, know that this may actually reflect a fear of leaving home. You can discuss this with your child's teachers, social workers, and other counselors.



Reintegration

As the injured parent continues to rehabilitate, your family is learning hopeful ways of going on and is starting to make long-term plans. For some, this may mean moving back to the base; for others, returning to a nonmilitary environment. Encourage your child to view such changes as part of a journey and as a way for your family to continue to grow and to experience new situations – together.



(or anyone else in the family) can go to take a break.

- ♥ **Take advantage of the services available from your community,** including family support groups, counselors, and medical professionals. You may do so anonymously if you prefer.
- ♥ **As the situation changes, you may have to adjust these routines.** When possible, keep big changes to a minimum, especially at first.



Invite your child to think of new ways to do things. A parent who has given an arm could offer a one-armed hug. And a parent who has given a leg could start enjoying games of wheelchair tag or soccer. Try a weekend breakfast picnic or a family naptime lullaby!

♥ **Explain that the process isn't over yet:** “Getting better can take a long time.” In many cases, therapy will be ongoing, doctors and medicines may continue to be part of everyday life, and there may be additional hospital stays.

♥ **The returning parent may not remember things.** She may be irritable and emotionally unavailable. Offer reassurance: “Mom needs some quiet time to think about things.” Make sure there are relaxing places in your home, outside, or elsewhere, where the returning parent

Older siblings, especially those who are more comfortable with change, can teach and reassure a younger child about handling a new and difficult situation. They can also be great ambassadors to the community at-large.



♥ **Encourage your child to share his new accomplishments and skills with the newly returned parent.** Your child has learned to hop, get dressed, and more. Enjoy these successes together. In the same way, your child can cheer when the injured parent masters a new skill or relearns a task.

♥ **Now that everyone is home again, you may need to reassign responsibilities.** Take care not to make your child feel as if he’s being demoted. Stress that you can all continue to share in everyday activities, but in a different way. After the readjustments, come up with some special, new family routines: Perhaps at the end of the week, each family member can

tell about “the best thing of the week.” Or your family can enjoy a session of weekend evening stargazing, with a cup of cocoa or lemonade in hand. Do things that will bring you together!

♥ **Be flexible.** Everyone will have to get used to new routines – for the hospital, for home, for therapy.

Changes are forever. This is your new family, your “new normal.” Have faith: Children can adjust. Help your child understand that paths in life are always changing; flexibility and resiliency make it possible to negotiate the turns. Most of all, the changes are part of an experience and a journey that your whole family will take together.

Turn the page to find out how to connect with us online. »»»



Some helpful Web sites:

www.asymca.org
www.centerforthestudyoftraumaticstress.org
www.deploymentkids.com
www.militarychild.org
www.militaryonesource.com
www.militarystudent.org
www.nmfa.org
www.parentsasteachers.org
www.pva.org
www.saluteheroes.org
www.survivingdeployment.com
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Editor in Chief: Rebecca Herman

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Line/Copy Editor: Jeanette Leardi

Proofreaders: Helena J. Carey, Diane Feldman

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Spanish Translation: Ruby Norfolk/Editing Partners

Spanish Proofreading: Ninoska Marcano, Liz Fernandez

Sesame Street Magazine

Art Director: Colleen Pidel

Deputy Editor: Kama Einhorn

Associate Editor: Mary Buri

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