

TEN TIPS FOR PARENTS FOR A POSITIVE REUNION

Source: Dr. (Col.) Tom Hardaway, Chief of the Department of Behavioral Medicine, Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, Texas

1. **Know the expectations of the returning warrior.** Knowing the expectations of the returning parent is important in every family. While you likely have expectations of what you and your returning spouse will do together again, as do the children, take a moment to step back and think where your returning spouse is coming from. He/she has been in a constant state of deprivation, hot and uncomfortable climate, strained sleeping conditions, sand everywhere, day after day without leave or weekend breaks. In addition, food has been monotonous, and your spouse has likely been exposed to the loss of or injury to fellow compatriots. There has been the constant threat of loss of life or injury to self. What has kept the warrior going is the feeling that the cause is just, concern about family back home, a very close connection with fellow soldiers, and thought after thought of regaining the things available at home.
2. **Do not be surprised at expectations of entitlement:** Just as you may not have been quite aware of your spouse's expectations, do not be surprised or hurt that initially, your spouse may have spoken or unspoken expectations of entitlement. Returning spouses' feelings are that they have laid down everything for several sustained months in the conditions described above, and that those at home are just waiting to "make it up to them". They may seem to be oblivious to your expectations and desires at first. It is important not to take this personally, or as a sign that they have no concerns about the family's desires or expectations.
3. **Be aware of your own expectations:** It is likely that you have had to bear an extremely large burden in the absence of your spouse, in caring as a single parent for children, attending to responsibilities in the home previously performed by your spouse, and may have had to endure many hardships and crises that you knew would not be helpful to share with your spouse in phone or e-mail conversations. You and your family may have "reconfigured" a little to remain stable, and may have established some newly found independence, perhaps with the finances. Perhaps there are now some new routines and rules in the home. Your expectation may be that your spouse would be pleased and congratulatory at your ability to do this.
4. **Be aware that you and/or your children may have mixed feelings, which is normal.** It is most usual for families to be very excited and happy about a returning soldier. But they also may have some anxiety or apprehension. There may have been pre-existing conflicts in the home, which most likely remained unsettled during the deployment. Children may feel that they have not been attentive enough in communicating with their deployed parent, or may have been acting up in their absence, or may have done poorly in school. They may be worried that the returning parent may be angry. Spouses may be concerned that they may lose some of their new independence, or that they may not have attended to the house or family well enough; or that their returning spouse may intrude and "change things all around".
5. **Children may not act as expected or desired.** Upon the return of the deployed parent, children may behave in paradoxical fashion. At the first moments of reunion, they may jump forward and embrace their parent, or, on the other hand, may stand back and even be reticent at first. Very young children may not remember their parent well, and may even treat that parent as a stranger. It is important for both parents not to take this as a bad sign or to take it personally. Different children may need help warming back up, and it will only prolong that warming-up period if parents become indignant or angry about their behavior. Some "wooing" by the returning parent and coaching and encouragement by the other parent will help things to become positive and warm again.
6. **Encourage your children to be aware of their expectations and worries, and assist them in sharing them with you without fear of your reactions.** If they have concerns or worries, help them to understand these are normal, and help them engage in problem solving. Reassure them as to the love that their deployed parent has for them, and that if

there are some problems to be sorted out, that everyone will work to solve them. Encourage them to suggest things they definitely want to do with their returning parent, and prioritize these activities so that there will not be an onslaught of expectations from the parent. Help the children to see ahead of time that things will have to happen in order, and that the returning parent may not be able to attend to all their desires right away.

7. **Try to share your and your children's expectations and any concerns ahead of time in your phone conversations prior to the returning spouse's redeployment home.**

Ask your returning spouses what they have in mind for when they return home. Allow them to express the things they really desire and miss, and encourage them to prioritize the most important things. This will get them to be more consciously aware of their own expectations. Then, share with your spouse what you hope will happen, and help him/her to understand what some of your desires are and some of the hopes and worries of the children. Keep these interactions in a positive and anticipatory mode. An example might be: "Jeff can't wait for you to get home. He is a little worried that you might be upset with him about his schoolwork, and about his behavior before you left. I told him that you will be excited to see him no matter what, and if there are school issues to work out, that we both will help him to get back on the tracks. How do you feel about his worries?"

Or, "Rachel is just 16 months right now, and remember you've been gone for four months. She says "Daddy", but she may still not act the way you expect. Give her a little time, and I know she'll be excited you're home after awhile. Hopefully, she'll surprise us!"

8. **Help your children to understand that their returning parent may need some alone time and not to perceive this negatively.**

Redeployed soldiers have been living in a very intimate, close-knit unit, with little privacy. Coming back to the home environment can be somewhat overwhelming, especially with very excited children in the house. Help them anticipate that their returning parent might need some "down" time and not necessarily always respond to their desires for activities, etc.

9. **Be prepared that your spouse may not appear as sensitive to your expectations as he/she should be.**

This is not necessarily a sign that he/she doesn't care, but understand that he/she may not behave exactly as you have been anticipating many times over. This is a time when it is even more important than usual to be explicit in what you are hoping for. Waiting for him/her to get "your clues" right off may make you resentful, and may make your spouse feel as if he/she is letting you down, leading to further resentment. Use humor and don't be afraid to talk directly. If he/she feels that he/she has already let you down, he/she may not feel that there is any way to correct the situation and may just become defensive. Give lots of chances for your spouse to hear you, and let him/her know how much you appreciate it when he/she exhibits the behavior you wanted. As with children, you want to "encourage good behavior"!

10. **There are successful reunions, but no ideal ones.**

"Ideal" is something that is only in fantasy. A mature and **successful** reunion is one where all concerned are aware of their own desires and concerns, and aware of those of their spouse and children. Along with the all the positive and excited moments, there are the very natural feelings and problems that require serious discussion and problem solving. The successful reunion includes excited smiles, embraces, laughter, and humor. It also requires a mature understanding that in order for the separation to be have been a positive experience, we must give a lot of "slack" to each other, do a lot of talking, a lot of planning and problem solving, and some forgiving. Children should know when it is all said and done, that their parents both love them now more than ever.