



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

## Helping Fathers Reconnect with their Families:

Issues faced by fathers returning from military service  
and other fathers seeking to reconnect with their  
children & families

**Jan. 27, 2009**

**2pm – 3:30pm EST**

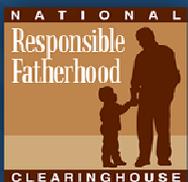
### **Moderator:**

**Nigel Vann:** NRFC Director of Training & Technical  
Assistance

### **Presenters:**

**Bryan Jersky and Donna Hilt:** Program Coordinators, Parents as  
Teachers/Dads on Duty, San Diego, CA

**Tim Red:** Director of Military Programming, National Fatherhood  
Initiative





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# Military Fathers & Families

**Tim Red**

**Director of Military Programming, National Fatherhood Initiative**





# Military Fathers & Families

- Active Duty Members (1.4 Mill.)
  - 516K (37%) are dads
  - 5.4% are single dads
  - 1.17 mill. kids total
  - 41% of children are under 5
- Reserve Members (880K)
  - 300K (34%) are dads
  - 5.6% are single dads
  - 713K kids total
  - 24% of children are under 5

Source: Military Family Resource Center



# Why a Military Father Program?

- Research reports tell us:
  - Military and family compete with each other
  - Service members are looking more for work/family “fit” than ever before
  - Service members make re-enlistment decisions based on family circumstances, leader support & satisfaction with services
  - Service members are more able to focus on mission when family concerns are addressed  
and . . .

# Why a Military Father Program?

Military kids need their fathers too!



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# Deployed Dads and Families





# What Is a Deployment?

# Deployed Fathers

- Approximately 165,000 fathers are currently deployed or on hardship duty
  - About 333,000 kids are separated from Dad because of deployment!

Sources: GlobalSecurity.org  
Military Family Resource Center



Photo Courtesy of  
Oregon National Guard.  
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- Military Health Task Force Special Report – June 2007

*“Over one million service members in the Active and Reserve components of the U.S. military have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), of whom 449,261 have been deployed more than once.”*



- Military Health Task Force Special Report – June 2007

*“Some service members have been separated from their families as long as three years, in repeated increments of three, six, eight, twelve and eighteen months.”*

# Deployed Dads, Who Are They?

- Regular Dads . . .
  - Parents
  - Providers
  - Husbands & Partners



Photo Courtesy of the National Military Family Association. Used with Permission.



# Deployed Dads Face Some Very Challenging Issues

- Separation
- Communication
- They miss important events
- How to help when they are not there
- Reunion/Reintegration



What is a  
Veteran?



# Veterans Face Some Very Challenging Issues

- Health issues – both mental and physical
- Child Custody
- Reintegration
- Employment
- Divorce



- Veterans and Families Organization

*“Unless our returning Veterans can learn ways to decompress from war and deployment and to lower their extreme symptoms of combat related stress, the anxiety, depression and self absorbed isolation they experience can last a lifetime. Consequently, both Veterans and their families will continue to suffer greatly and far too many will fall between the cracks of our society or will not survive the trials of homecoming.”*



*"By profession I am a soldier and take great pride in that fact. But I am prouder - infinitely prouder - to be a father."*

- General Douglas MacArthur, 1942



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# Helping Military Fathers Reconnect with their Families

**SAY San Diego  
Healthy Start Military Family Cluster  
Dads On Duty  
Bryan Jersky & Donna Hilt  
January 27, 2009**





# AGENDA

- The 3 Stages of Reunion
- Reuniting with your Children
- Reuniting with your Spouse
- Intimacy
- Finances
- Unrealistic Expectations
- Community & Other Resources



# 3 Stages of Reunion

- The 3 Stages of Reunion

- 1) Anticipation

- A few weeks before Homecoming
- Joy and anxiety

- 2) Readjustment

- After initial excitement of reunion
- Roles, routines, responsibilities renegotiated

- 3) Stabilization



# Reuniting with your Children

- Feelings and Issues of Fathers
  - Happiness, excitement, worry, fear

## Questions Fathers may have

- Will my children remember me?
- Will they know who I am?
- How are they going to act towards me?
- Will they obey me?
- How do I become part of the family again?
- Have my children been harmed by my absence?



# Reuniting with your Children

- Military Children
  - Happiness, excitement, worry, and fear.
  - Age will dictate how they express these feelings and emotions
- Infants and Toddler
- Preschool Children
- Elementary School Age Children
- Pre/Teenagers



# Reuniting with your Children

- Infants and Toddler (Birth – 3 years)
  - Infants meeting dad for first time
    - stranger anxiety
      - Cry
      - Prefer mom or even other familiar people
    - Jealousy
      - Moms relationship with the baby
    - THIS IS NORMAL!
  - Suggestions
    - Before deployment, make a tape of dad reading one of the baby's favorite books
      - See and hear dad
    - During deployment, give the baby dads clothes to hold and play with
      - smell
    - Be patient---it takes time to get to know each other



# Reuniting with your Children

- Elementary School Age Children (6-10 years)
  - Learning about social rules, conformity, and friendship
    - Concrete thinking
    - Anger about unfair situations
    - Very competitive
    - Role Confusion
      - “man of the house”
        - » Behavior problems at home & school
    - Safety concerns
      - Their home
      - Their family
      - The deployed parent
      - Themselves
    - Dread dads return??



# Reuniting with your Children

- Elementary School Age Children (6-10 years) cont.
  - Suggestions
    - Listen!
      - Your kids want to tell you everything you've missed
      - Acknowledge their feelings and concerns
    - Spend time with each child individually
    - Review School work
      - special attention to the success...however small
      - Try not to criticize
    - Expect and except that your children will have changed
      - Developmentally
      - Physically



# Reuniting with your Children

- Pre/Teenagers (11-18 years)
  - Family life often reflects military standards
    - Conformity
    - Obedience
    - Discipline
  - Often results in
    - Drive for independence
    - Challenge parents beliefs
  - Awareness of
    - World politics, War, Terrorism
    - Conflicted feelings about parents role
  - Fears, anger



# Reuniting with your Children

- Pre/Teenagers (11-18 years) cont
  - Negative comments and opinions about parents job
    - School and/or media
  - Difficult to share these feelings
    - Don't want to worry mom during deployment
  - May resist reunion activities
    - Too cool, too old, don't want to miss out on friends activities
  - Suggestions
    - Try not to be judgmental
    - Respect your teens privacy and friends
    - Individual time---undivided attention
    - Share experiences-----both of you
    - Patience----both of you



# Reuniting with your Spouse

- Roles and expectations may have changed
- Unresolved marital issues have not been resolved during your absence, and will likely resurface upon your return
- Questions by returning service members
  - Am I still needed?
    - Isolated, unwanted, un-needed, left out
  - Will she still love me?
  - What will our sexual relationship be like?
- Questions by returning military spouses
  - Do I have to change my way of doing things?
  - What will I have to give up?
  - Will my spouse like what I've done?
  - How will he have changed?
  - Will he still love me?
  - What will our intimate relationship be like?



# Reuniting with your Spouse

- Suggestions
  - Realize things may never be the same as before
    - Your spouse's independence has grown
    - Give her time to get used to sharing decisions and responsibilities
    - Be willing to negotiate your areas of responsibility
  - Patience for everyone to readjust to your return
    - You are needed, but more importantly...you are wanted
  - Recognize that your spouse has maintained the home front during your absence
    - Has learned to cope without you out of necessity
    - May feel disorganized and out of control as the family's deployment routines are disrupted
    - You may feel jealous of her newfound confidence and close relationship with the kids
    - Time and Patience



# Reuniting with your Spouse

- Suggestions cont.
  - You both must stop being “single” married spouses and start being married again
  - Focus on your marriage
    - Share feelings, needs, and experiences during separating
    - Develop a new shared sense of purpose together as a couple and as parents.



# Reestablishing Intimacy

- Sex vs Intimacy
  - Intimacy is both physical and emotional
  - High expectations
    - Awkwardness, disappointment, anxiety
  - Intense sexual activity
    - intimidating
    - Strangers
    - Sense of rejection
  - Rumors



# Reestablishing Intimacy

- Suggestions
  - Recognize change
  - “out of practice”
  - Take time to reestablish.....
    - Sexual relationship
    - Sense of intimacy
    - Partnership
  - Sleep patterns and routines
    - Fatigue and anxiety
  - Children
    - Private time limited
      - Patience, flexibility, creativity
  - Patience, Patience, Patience!



# Finances

- Misunderstandings & disagreements at home and during deployment can severely impede efforts to rebuild trust and purpose
- Urge to spend on family after being gone
- Extra deployment money ends
  - Significantly less money for everyday expenses
  - Many are not great at saving this extra money
- Excessive spending by spouse
  - Depression, Loneliness
- Cost of living, car repairs, appliance repairs
- Jobs
  - Active duty usually have secure employment
  - Reserve and National Guard must reintegrate into workforce



# Finances

- Suggestions
  - Establish a reasonable budget together before deployment
    - Plans for transitioning back to basic pay and allowances
    - Pay yourself first through a savings account/plan
  - After deployment you may want to treat yourself
    - Unless you can afford, stick to your budget



# Unrealistic Expectations

- Dreams of the “perfect reunion” most often result in disappointment, conflict, and confusion among all family members
- Understand and expect changes
  - Readjustment to home is a process, not an event. Give it time
- Your children's reactions may not be what you expected
  - Give them time to get know you again as you grow together
- Well meaning family and friends efforts to welcome you home may seem intrusive and overwhelming.
  - Patience, flexible, honest feelings, respectful
- Fantasies of long awaited sexual intimacy with your spouse may seem awkward at first
  - Disappointment and anxiety
  - Take it slow and be patient with each other



# General Guidelines

- Go Slowly – don't try to “take over” when you return
- Be strong- don't give in to children's demands
- Observe – examine the family's schedules and rules
- Be flexible – don't expect things to be the same
- Be realistic – don't expect the impossible
- Communicate – discuss your feelings
- Don't rush – slowly reestablish family relationships
- Be generous – spend time with your family



# Community Resources

- Military families may have access to a broad spectrum of support services within the military system
  - Reluctant to access those services
  - May fear negative impact on the service member's career if they are identified as a "problem family".
  - May be more comfortable seeking assistance from civilian service providers
    - May not know your organization can assist them
- If your organization is located near a military base, contact the director of the family support center.
  - Collaborate
    - FSC's offer comprehensive services
    - They may not be aware of your organization or your services



# Community Resources

- After contact
  - pursue outreach opportunities
    - pre-deployment briefings/fairs,
    - on-base family events (holidays)
    - Exceptional Family Member Program resource events.
  - military spouses who serve as liaisons
    - Between Commands and the families
      - Navy Ombudsmen Program
  - Collaboration with these groups is especially effective, since they are charged with directly assisting families in their Commands.
  - military children at public schools
    - meet with the principals to discuss services you can provide
  - Familiarize yourself with national organizations that provide support services & information not available through FSC's



# Community Resources

- **American Red Cross: 800-951-5600**
  - Sends emergency messages to active duty personnel anywhere in the world
- **Military One Source: 800-342-9647**
  - [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)
  - Comprehensive resources for all branches
  - Counseling referrals for short term care (6 sessions).
- **Fleet and Family Support Centers & Marine Corps Community Services**
  - Lending Locker, couples counseling, parenting classes, life skill classes, New Parent Support Teams, Family Advocacy, Sexual Abuse counseling.
- **Operation Homefront: 866-424-5210**
  - Assistance with car repairs, furniture, emergency financial assistance.
- **Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society**
  - Emergency financial assistance (grants/loans), food lockers, thrift shops, Budget for Baby classes/layettes, Visiting Nurses.



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If you have questions that were not addressed during this Webinar, please submit them to your Federal Project Officer or email [info@fatherhood.gov](mailto:info@fatherhood.gov).

*Thank you and have a  
great afternoon!*