# VETERAN PARENTS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

## (3-5 YEARS)

## VETERAN PARENTING TOOLKIT: TOGETHER BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES

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*Note*: This booklet is intended to provide general information only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for individualized mental health services. If you have concerns about a specific situation, contact your health professional directly.

**If you feel depressed for more than a couple of days, are unable to care for your child, or have thoughts of hurting your child or yourself, please call your doctor or pediatrician immediately.**

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## WELCOME

Congratulations on raising your child through the toddler stage to being a preschooler! Having a preschooler in the house can be exciting yet also busy and stressful. Big changes are ahead in the next couple of years as your child develops, and they are sure to bring opportunities for you to learn, grow, and strengthen your relationship with your child.

Preschool children are exploring their worlds and gaining more independence, and parents often have lots of questions. This is normal. This guide is designed to help Veterans and their families better understand and relate to their preschool child, especially following deployment.

Having a preschooler challenges parents to work together as a team because you need to discuss and negotiate many daily decisions. As you share and juggle the household and parenting duties, don't be surprised if you sometimes have different opinions about how to perform these tasks. That's common and ok. There's no one "right" way to parent, so respect each other's approach. When families are welcoming a parent back into the family after a deployment, parenting a young child can be extra challenging.

We created this booklet to remind you that:

- You are not alone.
- Many families are experiencing similar challenges.
- Resources are available to support you in being the best parent you can be.

Congratulations on your commitment to parenting and your interest in learning more about your child!

# DID YOU KNOW?

Preschoolers may learn 5 to 10 new words in a single day!

Preschool children often grow about 3 inches in height per year.

Preschoolers are very curious about how things work, and they learn best by playing.

Preschool children have active imaginations. They can become easily confused about what is real and what is imaginary.

Do you feel like your child is always on the move? He/she probably is! Preschoolers are more active than at any other time in their life.

# WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT IN YOUR CHILD'S PRESCHOOL YEARS?

As a parent, it can be helpful to know when new skills and behaviors usually begin. Your child is constantly growing, developing new skills, and learning new things. Consider the typical changes that occur for preschoolers.

*Please note:* No child follows exactly these milestones, and no two children develop at exactly the same pace. The timetables are just a guide for what "average development" looks like. If you have concerns about your child's development, please talk to your doctor.

**Physical Development**

Many physical changes take place during the preschool years. Preschoolers blossom physically and develop new physical skills, such as being able to:

- Run, skip, gallop, and jump on one foot
- Throw a ball overhand and with some control
- Ride a tricycle and later a bike with training wheels
- Do more daily tasks on their own, such as getting dressed, brushing their teeth, and picking up their rooms (but they still need help from adults)

**Other Big Changes for Preschoolers**

Preschoolers are also learning about the world and people in it. By interacting with your child and providing a healthy environment, you are helping him/her learn and develop important social skills. During this time, preschoolers tend to:

Emotions

- Become more independent and like to make their own decisions
- Have rapid and frequent mood swings from happy to sad, and back to happy again, sometimes over seemingly minor events
- Display and communicate a wide range of emotions, including pride, love, jealousy, shame, and doubt
- Get frustrated easily, but prefer to do things without help
- Want recognition for success and accomplishments
- Develop fears (especially as their imaginations develop)
- Respond well to praise and encouragement from parents and teachers (such as stickers, treats, special time together)
- Develop a sense of humor

Speech

- Learn many new words; children enter the preschool years knowing 900-1000 words, and this can increase to 4,000 - 5,000 words before they enter kindergarten
- Talk a lot!

- Speak in 4 to 6-word sentences, up to 9-word sentences by kindergarten

- Imitate sounds or words, and memorize short sayings, songs, and rhymes
- Talk to themselves when playing

Play

- Love to play, play, play
- Can play for short periods of time alone, but really enjoy playing with adults and other children
- Play next to children and begin to play with other children; sharing is a developing skill that improves with age
- May enjoy physical play with adults and other kids, such as chasing, wrestling, and climbing, and can show some aggression (while this is to be expected, do not allow violent or hurtful behaviors towards others)
- Engage in pretend play with simple themes
- Imitate adult activities through play, such as mowing the grass, putting on make-up, and repeating words or phrases said by adults
- Enjoy doing the same thing over and over again in play, like singing the same song and reading the same book
- Start to understand basic rules and directions; respond to simple rewards and consequences

Interacting With Parents/Adults

- Enjoy having thoughtful conversations
- Understand rules but follow the rules mainly because of consistent rewards and consequences
- Have a lot of questions; will often ask how, what, why questions
- Show independence by saying "NO!" or doing the opposite of what the parent asks
- Want to help and imitate adults; want to be part of household activities and can be very helpful with small tasks.

Learning

- Can identify colors and shapes
- Can say ABCs and begin to identify letters and sounds
- Understand numbers, can count to 10, and understand concepts of quantity (more, less, etc.)
- Begin to understand distance, location, and time as they grow older
- Begin to write letters and their name, and draw simple shapes

*Note:* If you are concerned about your child's learning, please talk with his/her preschool teacher or pediatrician. Also, the Department of Education has a list of skills expected for kindergarten readiness that may be helpful in identifying concerns.

*A note about boys and girls*: Although every child is unique, in general boys and girls develop at different rates. You may notice differences between your children, and understanding these gender differences can be useful. For example:

- Girls usually develop the skills and abilities described in this section slightly before/earlier than boys.
- Girls tend to develop verbal skills slightly faster than boys.
- Boys are generally more active, physical, and willing to risks and explore new things.
- At this age, girls and boys begin to recognize gender differences and may show preferences for common gender-related activities.
- Girls' play often involves imitating nurturing skills (such as playing with dolls), while boys' play can be more physical and aggressive (such as playing with trucks or cars). Even at this young age, children are starting to conform to gender roles. However, it is completely normal for boys to play with dolls and girls to play with trucks.
- Children tend to prefer to play with other kids of the same gender.

Adapted from: www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/
www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/todd.dev.html
http://ohioline.osu.edu/asc-fact/ASC7.pdf
http://ohioline.osu.edu/asc-fact/ASC8.pdf

## RECONNECTING WITH YOUR PRESCHOOLER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

So, you get off the plane, run into the arms of your family, enjoy all the homecoming festivities, greet your wonderful child, and suddenly have this amazingly close connection to your preschooler, know everything about your child's unique routines and needs, and are ready to jump into 24/7 parenting, right?

> "The homecoming was amazing. But then it's the day after and the day after that, and this feeling of what now?"
>
> Sergeant Major Jason Peach quoted in *The Guardian* (2007, December 1) by Dave Hill. 'We won't know for a long time what this has done to us.'

Typically, NOT! This may feel like a culture shock for you, and it's important to give it time. For some families, the adjustments go smoothly, while others require more patience. With time and some effort, you and your child can create a strong, happy relationship.

Just like adults, children vary in how they react to their returning parent. It may help to know that

- Your child may not recognize or remember you at first. Don't worry, as children learn quickly and will get to know you with time.
- Don't be surprised if your child is timid, pulls away, or clings to the person who cared for him/her while you were deployed. This can be tough, but it's important to avoid taking the rejection personally. Your child also needs some time to adjust. Strive to be patient and understanding.
- The strong emotions surrounding homecoming can be both exciting and confusing for the young child. Your child may temporarily show changes in eating or sleeping routines, or lose skills he/she had previously learned.
- With your partner's help, become involved in the daily routines with your child. Routines are a great time to connect with and care for your child. As a returning service member, you have unique strengths in creating an environment that is predictable and safe.
- Try to spend some one-on-one quiet time with your child every day, even if just for a few minutes. Get down on his/her level, and listen carefully to what he/she wants to tell you. Figure out what your child likes doing (such as his/her favorite game/toy) and play together often. Let him/her pick the activity; you follow along.

## HOW TO TALK TO YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILD ABOUT YOUR DEPLOYMENT

Preschoolers really grasp where you were during your deployment, what you did, or how long you were gone?

OF COURSE NOT!

Can they clearly put into words how they felt about your departure and absence?

PROBABLY NOT TOO WELL.

But, should you talk to your preschool child about your deployment?

DEFINITELY!

It is very important to talk to your child about deployment, but remember that he/she cannot understand lengths of time. You can say that you are sad that you missed his/her birthday party and trick-or-treating together for Halloween, (etc.), and that you are happy to be home now.

You can explain (in child-friendly language) that you were protecting our country to keep us safe. You can share some of the positive things you did during your deployment, such as re-building a school or helping children.

When you talk about your deployment, strive to speak in an unemotional, calm way and to avoid giving details about dangerous situations you may have encountered.

It's important to be open to hearing your children's feelings about your absence—both their pride in your service and their sadness at your absence.

You may read books to your child about parental deployment (see examples in the Resource List at the end of this booklet). As a family, you may write your own storybook about your family's experience with the deployment(s). Your child can color pictures, and you can write a short story about everyone's experiences before, during and after the deployment.

You might also look through pictures together of events that took place during deployment – both pictures you took while overseas (not anything that might upset your child) and those taken back at home of your preschooler/family. Pictures can be a great way to start a conversation and to share memories.

If you may be deployed again, emphasize that right now, you are here, and that you will tell your child if you need to leave again. Also stress that someone will always be there to take care of him/her – and say who that person will be.

Remember that preschoolers' attention spans are usually very short. Follow your child's lead in answering any questions, and don't over-explain. Questions may also seem random and out of the blue – this is normal. Answer the questions again!

## TIPS ON STRENGTHENING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PRESCHOOLER

Preschool children enjoy being able to explore and try new things, and they often want to do things on their own. Preschoolers often seem to bounce from one activity to another, playing with a toy/game for only 5-10 minutes. They learn by exploring, experimenting, and asking questions, so be ready for all sorts of questions (some that you might not even know how to answer). Preschoolers love to use their imaginations, imitate adults, and repeat games or activities over and over.

> For Colonel George Brandt, behavioral-health chief at the base hospital…"being able to get on the floor and play with your kids. Then you know you're home."
>
> McGurk, T. (2009, November 30). How one Army town copes with posttraumatic stress. *Time Magazine*.

So, what can I do with my child? What might he/she enjoy?

Preschoolers enjoy playing active games, such as the following:

- Running through the lawn sprinkler
- Building a snowman or making snow angels
- Playing games in the bathtub
- Playing catch, kicking balls, and running (not only are these great exercise, they also give kids opportunities to work on motor skills, coordination and teamwork)
- Cheering on your family's favorite sports teams (put on your favorite team's colors, get out some healthy snacks, and cheer together)

Preschool children enjoy playing with textures, which they can do in these activities:

- Finger painting or working with Play Dough
- Playing in shaving cream
- Playing in a sandbox or with a tray of uncooked rice

Preschoolers like using their imagination in play.

- Children learn through play…their memory, creativity, and ability to solve problems are shaped and developed through their play.
- Great toys include blocks, play kitchens, dolls, puzzles, dress-up clothes, pegboards, simple board games and books; but toys don't need to be expensive or fancy. Pots, pans or an empty big box can spark a child's imagination. Just be sure your child is safe and cannot hurt him/herself or anyone else.
- Talk and interact with your child as he/she plays—preschool children love for adults to describe and imitate their play behaviors.
- Join in your child's imaginary world. Let him/her take the lead during playtime, and don't be afraid to be silly. Encourage your child's healthy imagination.

Preschool children want to be independent (but they want their parents around for support, too). Instead of fighting your child's normal desire to be independent, roll with it!

- Invite your child to help around the house.
- Give your child simple tasks that can be accomplished with few directions, such as putting the toys in the toy chest.
- Turn family chores into a game or a learning experience. You can sing a song or play "musical chairs" during clean-up, ask your children to count the number of toys they put away, or help them sort clothes by colors.
- Many children will be happy to do tasks with a little help from their parents. Preschool children like to feel helpful and will usually keep helping if you praise them for their assistance.

**Special Tips for Partners/Family Members**

- Give your Veteran support in getting to know your child again. This can be a special time for the two of you as you share in the joys of your child's spirit, endearing behaviors, and energy.
- Your Veteran may have some great ideas about how to parent. Your child may respond well to these new techniques, so be creative and try them out. As long as your child is safe, it is ok for your Veteran to do things differently than you.
- Work together with your Veteran to include him/her in your child's daily routines. For example, you may decide that he/she always reads books to the children before bed. Tricky as it may be for you, try to let him/her create his/her own routines and ways of doing the task instead of jumping in with, "No, that's not the way I do it."

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

## SPECIFIC ISSUES WITH PRESCHOOLERS

Parenting a preschool child can be both challenging and rewarding. This section contains suggestions for dealing with some of the most common issues faced by parents of preschoolers: effective discipline and the power of praise, sleep/nightmares, learning how to deal with strong feelings, and making healthy friendships. If you have concerns about other issues, talk to your child's healthcare provider and/or look at the resources listed in the back of this booklet.

**Effective Discipline and the Power of Praise**

"Discipline" comes from the Latin word "to teach," and effective discipline is just that – teaching your child how to behave in the world and interact with others. Many people think of discipline only in terms of punishment or consequences, but effective discipline is much more.

Effective discipline requires three things, including:

A positive, loving relationship with your child

- Your child is more likely to mind when he/she feels close to you.
- Especially if your child is having behavioral problems, spend time every day playing with and building your relationship with your child.
- Model the behavior you wish to teach.
- Want respectful children? Speak respectfully.
- Want children who work hard? Let them watch and help you as you work.

Praise, praise, praise

- You get more of what you notice. Pay attention only to bad behavior, and you will get more bad behavior. Pay attention to the moments (even if they seem rare) when your child is behaving well, and those moments will become more frequent.
- Children love to be praised, especially by you! When your child is doing something you like, clearly say so, such as, "*I love the way you are being gentle with your sister*," or "*Thank you for using your words to tell me what you want*."

Use of clear, consistent, immediate consequences

Creating rules and sticking with the consequences is a tough but important part of parenting. Here are some suggestions for doing this well.

- Decide (as a team with your co-parent) what your rules and expectations are in advance. Make sure your child is old/mature enough to meet your expectations.
- Give consequences immediately after the bad/wrong behavior, and relate the consequence to the behavior. (This approach is more effective than spanking.)
    - ✓ Is your child using a toy to hurt others? Take the toy away, and move your child away from other kids.
    - ✓ Is your child throwing food? It may be time to end the meal.
- Clearly enforce the consequences every time. Being consistent is key.
- Remain calm and speak like a robot (with no emotion in your voice). Instead of reacting to your distress, your child will learn that his/her misbehavior produced the unwanted outcome, and he/she will want to avoid those behaviors in the future.

Reference: Pediatrics 1998; 101( 4): 723-728. American Academy of Pediatrics.
Guidance for Effective Discipline. Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health

**Sleep and Nightmares**

Many children continue to have sleep problems through the preschool years. Children need to get quality sleep during this very active time of their lives, so their bodies can rest. Also, they are developing habits they will take with them into adulthood, so it's great to help your child develop good habits early on. Children at this age need 10 to 12 hours of sleep a day.

Consider the following suggestions for helping your child sleep well.

- Create and maintain a consistent bedtime routine. Do the same things in the same order every night, so it's predictable for you and your child. Ideas for the bedtime routine include the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| Picking out pajamas | Brushing teeth |
| Bathing | Reviewing the day's best moments |
| Reading books | Bedtime blessing, hugging, or kissing |
| Saying prayers | Rocking with your child |
| Singing songs | Patting your child's back |

- Give a warning to your child before bedtime ("*In 10 minutes, it will be time for us to get ready for bed,"* or "*When this game is done, we will be headed to bed*").
- Make the transition to bedtime fun ("*I bet I can beat you to the bathroom to brush your teeth*") and give choices ("*Do you want to wear your blue pajamas or the green ones?").*
- Pick your battles carefully, saying "no" only to the things that really matter. Children want to make their own choices, so let them choose when you can (which stuffed animals to have on the bed, which book to read, etc.).
- Allow some quiet, cuddle time together during the bedtime routine. These quiet moments are a special time to connect with your child and talk about his/her day
- Make sure your child is getting enough sleep. Many children have trouble falling and staying asleep if they are overtired. Preschool children need about 10-12 hours of sleep per night. A set bedtime and wake-up time can help establish this predictable routine.
- Many preschool children take daytime naps of 1-3 hours. Even when they have outgrown the nap itself, young children often benefit from a quiet rest period in their room.
- Limit your child's intake of caffeine, chocolate, and sugary drinks, especially in the afternoon and evening hours.
- Turn off the TV/computer/game system and enjoy relaxing activities with your child for 30-60 minutes before bedtime, such as reading books, playing low-key board games, working puzzles, or coloring.
- Some children develop fears at this age, so make your child's bedroom soothing – a night light, favorite blanket, or stuffed animal can be helpful.
- If your child wakes up during the night and comes to your room, walk him/her back to his/her bed and help soothe your child so he/she can fall back asleep. Try to be as calm and boring as possible.

- Limit your child's exposure to scary and violent media (TV, computer games, Internet, etc.).

**Nightmares and Night Terrors**

Both nightmares and night terrors are common in preschoolers and can be difficult for both children and their parents.

Below is a chart that describes the difference between nightmares and night terrors.

| | **Nightmare** | **Night Terror** |
|---|---|---|
| **Appearance and behavior** | Frightening dream; child may awaken afraid and crying | Screaming, crying, thrashing during sleep; may appear partially aroused, anxious and agitated |
| **What age does it start?** | Frequently first occurs in toddlers and older | May begin at age 4 or 5 (or at times later) |
| **Timing of episodes** | Often in the second part of the night during intense dreaming | Mostly during nondreaming sleep; episodes start within 2 hours of going to sleep and last 5 to 15 minutes; occur most often when child has a fever or sleep schedules are disrupted |
| **Return to sleep** | May have trouble going back to sleep due to anxiety | Goes back to sleep quickly |
| **Memory of experience** | May remember the dream and talk about it | No memory of the episode |
| **Underlying issues** | Not associated with emotional problems, but may reflect inner fears surfacing in dreams | Not associated with emotional problems |
| **Management** | Awaken and comfort your child; talk to him/her to ease any stress that may be bothering him/her; avoid watching TV before bedtime | Treatment with medications not effective; try putting child to bed a little earlier to avoid tiredness |
| **Long-term** | Talk to pediatrician if child complains of nightly nightmares | Most children outgrow having night terrors. |

Reprinted with permission of Mr. Jason Crase (permission obtained May 13, 2010), American Academy of Pediatrics. For educational purposes only. (www.healthychildren.org)

Nightmares are scary dreams that occur while a child is in a deep state of sleep. When children have nightmares, it's helpful for parents to provide comfort and reassurance, remind them that they are safe, and help them refocus on something happy.

Night terrors are different and are unique to the preschool years. During night terrors, children appear to be awake and afraid. They frequently yell or cry and are very hard to soothe. Although night terrors can be very upsetting for parents, the good news is that children do not remember them. During night terrors, parents should remain calm, talk quietly (such as, "*You are safe; Daddy is here*"), and comfort/hold him/her. Do not take drastic measures to try to wake your child. Know that this will pass!

If your child's sleep problems continue or if they become frequent, contact your pediatrician.

**Managing Strong Emotions**

Spend a few minutes with preschoolers, and you can see that they feel things very strongly. Their emotions can change at the drop of a hat. These strong emotions can be quite challenging for parents.

One of the important tasks of this age is learning how to effectively manage strong feelings, such as sadness, excitement, fear, and anger.

Here are some suggestions for teaching your child how to deal with feelings:

- Talk about feelings with your child. When reading stories, discuss how the characters seem to be feeling. When watching cartoons, talk about which characters seem happy or sad and why.
- While it is not a good idea to overwhelm your child with your own strong emotions, it can be helpful to share how you feel about certain things; for example: "*Mommy is happy to see you,"* "*Daddy is frustrated that the lawnmower doesn't work*," "*I'm mad that you just hit your sister,"* or "*Bumping my toe really hurts."*
- Help your child to identify his/her emotions. For example, "*You look happy riding your bike,"* "*You seem mad that he took your toys*," or "*You seem sad, so I will hold you*."
- Teach your child the Anger Rules:
    - It is not ok to hurt other people
    - It is not ok to hurt things
    - It is ok to talk about your feelings
- Calmly and consistently enforce consequences if your child violates these rules. Especially for children with limited vocabularies, it can be useful to teach them a few phrases that they can say when feeling frustrated or needing space, such as "*Help, please*," "*This is my toy,"* and "*Break*."
- Transitions are often a difficult time for preschool children. You can help by:
    - Describing the transition ahead of time: "*In a few minutes we are going to leave the house*."
    - Offering choices: "Do you want to put your pants on first or your shirt on first?"
    - Allowing plenty of time. Preschool children tend to melt down when rushed, so when possible, allow extra time to get things done.
    - Suggesting they take something special with them: "Would you like to take two cars with you?"
    - Making it fun: "I'm going to chase you to the car!"
- Model managing feelings in a healthy way yourself. This is the single most important thing you can do in teaching your child how to manage strong feelings. Your kids learn more from watching you than from anything else you can do!
- Teach strategies for managing feelings. For example, "*When I'm upset, it helps to ask for help,"* or "*When kids get scared, it helps them to hold a stuffed animal*," or "*Sometimes it helps to take nice deep breaths to calm down."*

## Making Healthy Friendships

Before preschool, most children engage in what is called "parallel play." This means they play near other children and may be doing the same activity, but don't play with each other much and don't take turns in their play. One of the joys and challenges of preschool is that children start to develop friendships with other children and engage in more shared play.

This stage is an exciting time for children and their parents but also comes with challenges. Preschoolers can learn a great deal in playing with friends, such as how to share, take turns, communicate well, and use good manners.

Here are some suggestions for helping your child make the most of his/her friendships:

- Model polite behavior. Talk to your child the way you want him/her to talk to others. Say "please" and "thank you" both to your child and to others.

- Help your child understand the impact of his/her behavior. For example, if your child grabs a toy from another child, say "*Susie is sad you took her toy*." On the other hand, if your child is sharing, say, "*It makes Tommy happy when you share*." Children do not automatically understand the impact their behavior has on others, but you can help them develop this skill by explaining what other people are thinking and feeling as a result of different behaviors.

- Sharing is one of the most difficult skills preschoolers work on at this age.

    - It's ok to allow your child to select a few special toys he/she does not have to share.
    - It may also be helpful to have duplicates of certain toys (two cars, multiple dolls, etc.) so that every child can have one when playing.
    - Set time limits on playing with certain toys ("After we sing the ABC's, it will be your friend's turn to play with the toy).
    - Remove toys from play that are causing conflict.
    - When your child does share, provide clear praise: "Thank you for sharing your doll with Jane." Punishment for not sharing tends to lead to more power struggles and is rarely effective; instead, focus on praising when your child does share.
    - Play games with your child that involve turn taking. For example, take turns putting pieces in a puzzle, rolling a ball, or building a tower with blocks. While doing this, say "*My turn, now it's your turn*," etc.

- Make sure the play environment is safe. Preschool children are curious and can get into everything. Make sure that your house is carefully child proofed, and check on other homes your child may be visiting to make sure those homes are safe as well. Get to know the parents of your child's friends.
- During play dates, arrange activities for children to play during their time together. Allow them to play together and solve any disagreements without hovering, but be available if they need support or extra guidance.

## WHAT ARE RED FLAGS FOR CONCERN WITH YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILD?

Sometimes it's really tough to know if your child's behavior is "normal" or if you should seek professional advice. You know your child the best, and you know when his/her behavior has changed from what is "normal" for him/her.

Research has found that the following behaviors may indicate some difficulties in preschool children:

- A significant change in your child's level of clinginess, crying or whining
- Having difficulty calming down and being comforted by you
- High levels of aggression (hurting toys, pets, other children, themselves)
- Considerable changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Losing skills that had previously been mastered (such as talking or toilet training) or showing significant delays in milestones (achievements expected for that age) discussed in the development section of this booklet

Remember: Preschool children (like adults) have bad days—this is normal! You may see more difficulties during times of higher family stress, such as when a Veteran returns after a deployment; these short-term reactions usually go away with time. However, if problems persist over a couple of months, your child and family may benefit from guidance from a healthcare professional.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

*Note*: If you find yourself struggling with anger, substance abuse, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, parenting will likely be more challenging. One of the most important things you can do for your child is get support for yourself. It may be valuable to seek professional help if you find yourself reacting poorly to or feeling overwhelmed by your child.

## WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS?

If you need moral support or a "listening ear" about parenting, you may want to contact

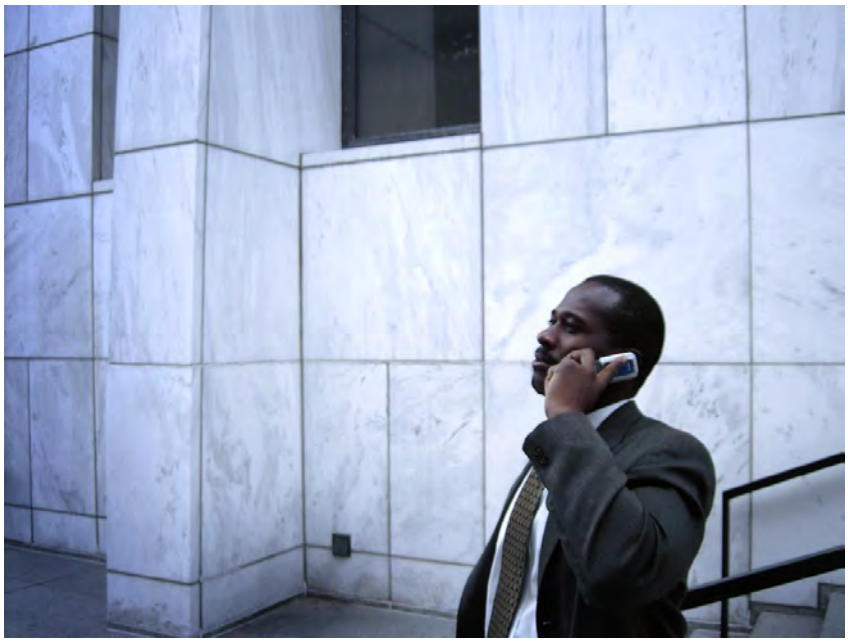
- A friend (especially one who has children)
- A relative
- Someone from a community organization (such as your church, book club, etc.)

If you want to gather more information about a specific issue, you can

- Check out a book at the library
- Look online at the helpful websites in our resource list
- Ask your pediatrician for information on the topic
- Talk to your childcare providers or your child's teacher

Other helpful resources include your

- Pediatrician or child's doctor
- Nurse line
- Mental health professional
- Department of Human Services
- Community/county health department
- The Head Start program in your community
- WIC (Women, Infants and Children) offices



## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AS A PARENT

Being a parent is probably one of the most difficult jobs you will ever have, but also one of the most rewarding. You are truly the most important person/people in your child's life—an amazing opportunity, but sometimes a big sense of responsibility, too.

It's easy to glamorize the job of parenting when you see pictures or watch movies of happy families, with everyone smiling, a beautiful baby bouncing in someone's arms, and the family off for a fun day at the zoo. Those special times are great—but you typically don't see the parents struggling with loads of dirty laundry, exhaustion due to balancing a career and family, their worry about their child's frequent stomach aches, and the decreased patience you sometimes have with your partner. All those elements of parenting don't look quite as exciting, but are very real and can be stressful for all parent(s).

So, it's very important that you as a parent take good care of yourself. What energizes one parent may not work well for another, so you may experiment with different options. Remember that you're being a good parent by taking time for you! Here are some suggestions that other parents find helpful:

- Remember that this is a phase of your life. You will eventually have more time for yourself. Try to enjoy this time with your children!
- Work to create some "alone" time every day. Perhaps your relatives or friends could assist with childcare to allow for this time in your schedule. Also, establishing (and following) a set bedtime for your children can give you some much-needed alone time and time to spend as a couple in the evening.
- Connect with supportive friends and family members. Although exchanging text messages and chatting on Facebook can be great, there's nothing like spending quality time together, even if it's just a short chat over coffee.
- Make time for regular physical exercise. You can be creative and include your child (like walks to the park), or explore childcare options (like Mom's Day Out) for a solo workout at the local gym. Physical exercise is the very best technique for managing your stress.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Try to get enough sleep (7-8 hours per night). Consider taking a nap when your child is resting.
- Practice regular relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, prayer/meditation, and muscle relaxation. You may find relaxation audio CDs to be calming as well.

- Be creative about ways you can include your children in the things you love or enjoy. Like cooking? Get them a stool to stand on in the kitchen and have them "help" you. Preschool kids can scoop oatmeal from one container to another, and as they get older they can be involved in pouring and stirring. Enjoy gardening? Get your child a small shovel to dig with, or have your child help pick out bulbs. Enjoy reading? Take your kids to the library. There are hundreds of ways to include your children in the things you love.

Part of being a good parent involves knowing when you feel overwhelmed and need a break. What can you do when your stress level is high?

- Ensure that your child is safe and go into another room for a few minutes to calm down.
- Take a walk or a jog
- Take several deep breaths.
- Schedule a pleasant activity (for you alone or with your partner/ a friend).
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member. Ask for help.
- Remember that this is just a season of your life. Although things may feel overwhelming or out of balance right now, it's not always going to be like this.

## RECONNECTING WITH YOUR PARTNER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

Just as it's important for parents to take a break from the stress of parenting for "alone" time, it's also vital that you take time to nurture your relationships. As you are adjusting to having your family back together, your relationship with your spouse/partner will need attention, time, and energy. Keeping a relationship strong takes work, and the well-being of your relationship is important for you and your children. That's true whether you and your partner are currently married, single or divorced.

"I'm just excited…I'm ready to start the next chapter of our lives."

Joy Lindgren (whose husband was returning from his third deployment). Slipke, D. (2010, January 10). Oklahoma soldiers rejoin their families, lives. *The Oklahoman*

When you're exhausted from caring for your child(ren), it can be easy to neglect these relationships. However, research shows that having people you can count on is important for your physical and mental health.

When encouraged to make time for adult relationships, parents often say, "But we don't have time…we can't afford it…we're too busy!" Guess what? We understand—but we challenge you to be creative. For example, some couples have found these ideas helpful:

- Try Mother's Day Out, and meet your partner for lunch.
- Get a babysitter and have an evening out, or maybe try to trade babysitting with another family you know.
- Ask extended family to watch your child(ren) for an evening, or maybe even for a get-away weekend for the two of you.
- Commit to spending 10 minutes as a couple every night after you put the kids to bed. Focus this time only on the two of you (not on the kids, bills, schedule, etc.) and use it as a time to re-connect.
- Invite another family over for dinner or go on a picnic together. Your children can play together, and you can enjoy the company of other adults.
- Join a couples' Sunday School class at your church/synagogue/house of worship.
- Join a gym/YWCA (pick one that has good child care), and regularly exercise together.
- Commit to regularly scheduled naps and bedtimes for your children, giving you that time together to share as a couple.

**Tips on Communicating with Your Partner**

When a service member comes home, most families are filled with excitement and have high expectations. Often partners have very different expectations of what life will be like. Sometimes, the reality of a homecoming does not exactly meet both partners' expectations.

It is important to talk about the changes that have taken place during this time apart. Spend time talking with each other – you've both been through a lot during the deployment, and you both have changed. Talking openly can help you get to know each other again, gain a sense of intimacy, and rebuild family routines. If you struggled with issues of closeness and communication before the relationship, this can be an incredible opportunity to strengthen and develop those skills.

Some Veterans quickly figure out that the way they talked to others in the military doesn't work very well in family life.

Military communication is often marked by:

Giving orders

Requiring obedience without question

Avoiding emotions (other than sometimes anger)

Expecting an immediate response

Such communication does not encourage skills that are essential elements of intimate relationships such as:

Listening

Give and take

Compromise

Negotiation

Consideration of the other's feelings

Expression of vulnerability (sadness and fear)

Comforting your partner

Therefore, you, as a Veteran may want to reflect on using "home-front" communication skills instead of "military" communication. We expect those close to you will greatly appreciate your efforts, and your relationships will grow closer. Of course, these changes do not happen overnight—you've been gone for many months. However, if you keep these concepts in your mind and work with them, you can improve your communication quite quickly.

You both may find some of these communication skills to be helpful reminders:

- Take turns talking and sharing thoughts and feelings.
- Take responsibility for your own feelings and actions by describing clearly how you feel (such as, "*I feel…*", "*I'm concerned about…*").

For example, instead of yelling, *"You never listen to me!*" you could say, "*I feel frustrated when you text message other people when I'm trying to talk to you.*"

- Listen and avoid interrupting when your partner shares his/her feelings and opinions.
- Don't assume you know what the other is thinking or feeling.
- Always show respect. If either of you is feeling out of control, take a time-out and return to the discussion at a later, calmer time.

**Helpful Strategies for Couples during the Reintegration Process**

- Go slowly - don't try to make up for lost time. Be patient with yourself, your partner, and your children. You cannot rush this process.
- Accept that your partner has changed during the time apart. Take time to get to know each other again.
- Keep talking. Talking can help you reconnect as a couple and as a family.
- Discuss what you expect and how you want to handle household responsibilities, parenting responsibilities, and other matters that changed during the deployment(s). Now may be a time to get rid of a chore that you really hate (maybe your partner wouldn't mind mowing the lawn), and you could take over balancing the checkbook. Be flexible!
- Work on skills to deal with painful feelings rather than lashing out. You both may have developed some strong feelings during the deployment, and these may emerge now that the Veteran is home. Check in with yourself if you see this happening. Use healthy ways of managing strong feelings (exercise, journaling, prayer/meditation, etc.), and share your emotions with your partner when both of you are calm.

"Lt. Col John Zenker told the soldiers their mission was almost complete, but first they needed to finish one more step: Reintegrate with their families, friends and jobs… You need to be patient with yourselves and your loved ones"

Slipke, D. (2010, January 10). Oklahoma soldiers rejoin their families, lives. *The Oklahoman.*

- Tell your partner how he/she can help you. Be specific. Then, be sure to say THANKS when you notice him/her being supportive.

  For example,

  "*I need to talk about some things. Do you have some time now to listen?*"

  "*I know you're trying to be helpful when you give me advice, but I really don't need that right now. If you could just listen for now, it would mean a lot to me.*"

  *"Thanks so much for taking the kids to the park this afternoon. I really needed some time to myself, and it was great to have some peace and quiet. I enjoyed this evening with you and the kids a lot more because of it!"*

- Seek professional help if needed. If your relationship is not improving after a couple of months, you may need help from a professional, preferably one with experience in working with families dealing with deployment.

*Special note for family members/friends*: Don't force your Veteran to talk about the experience of war, but be open to it if/when the time is right.

If your Veteran does not want to talk about his/her experiences in Iraq/Afghanistan, don't push him/her. It may be helpful for him/her to discuss tough experiences first with a mental health professional or chaplain.

If your Veteran wants to share his/her painful experiences with you, try to listen without judging. The key is to gain your veteran's trust, so he/she feels that it is safe to talk with you. However, if you become overwhelmed yourself, gently and lovingly tell him/her that you need a break. It may be best for the Veteran to seek professional assistance at that time.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON ISSUES WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

**Books to Read to Preschool Children**

Dealing with Emotions

*Hands Are Not for Hitting.* (2000). M. Agassi. Free Spirit Publishing.

*How Are you Peeling? Foods with Moods*. (2004). S. Freymann & J. Elffers. Levine Books.

Deployment

*Daddy, You're My Hero! // Mommy, You're My Hero!* (2005). M. Ferguson-Cohen. Little Redhaired Girl Publishing.

*My Red Balloon.* (2005). E. Bunting. Boyds Mills Press.

Friendship

*A Rainbow of Friends*. (2006). P.K. Hallinan. Ideals Children's Books.

*Being Friends.* (2002). K. Beaumont. Dial.

*How Do Dinosaurs Play with Their Friends*? (2006). J. Yolen. Blue Sky Press.

*My Friend and I.* (2003). L. Jahn-Clough. Sandpiper.

**Books for Parents**

*1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12.* (2004). T. W. Phelen. ParentMagic, Inc.

*Becoming the Parent You Want To Be: A Sourcebook of Strategies for the First Five Years.* (1997). L. Davis. Broadway.

*Emotional First Aid for Parents: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Predictable Life Crises.* (2010). G. Koocher & A. LaGreca. Oxford University Press.

**Websites**

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.healthychildren.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:
www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Child Development:
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/