VETERAN PARENTS WITH TEENAGERS

(13-18 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, or have thoughts of hurting your child or yourself, please call your doctor immediately.

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WELCOME

Congratulations on entering an exciting time of parenthood—having a teenager! Living with teens in the house can make for a fun, yet busy and stressful time. Big changes are ahead in the next couple of years, and they are sure to bring opportunities for you to develop, strengthen, and probably test your relationship with your teenager.

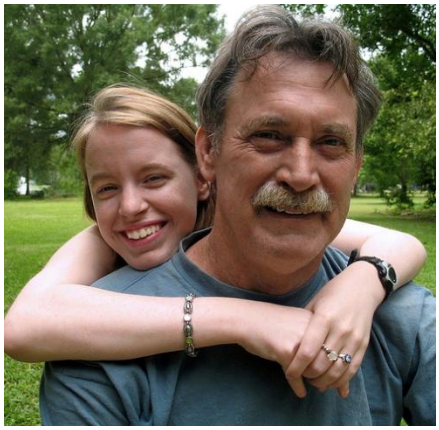
During the teenage years, young people become more independent and define their identity. Parents often have many questions. This is normal. This guide is designed to help Veterans and their families better understand and relate to their teenager, especially following deployment.

Having a teenager challenges parents to work together as a team as you 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, so respect each other's approach. When families are welcoming a parent back into the family after a deployment, parenting teenagers 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 teenager!



DID YOU KNOW?

Teenagers require a lot of sleep...in fact, they need over 9 hours of sleep per night!

Teenagers develop physically faster than at any time in their life, since being an infant. For example, a teenage boy may grow over 3 inches, and a girl may grow over 4 inches in just one year.

Teens may be more independent than ever before, but their parents are still important in helping them to make good decisions.

American children (ages 8-18) spend more than 7.5 hours per day on their computers; plugged into MP3 players; watching TV; or playing video, computer or handheld games. For much of that time, they are doing several of these at once. [2]

Ever wonder why your teenager spends hours in the bathroom getting ready? Physical appearance is more important now than ever before. Both girls and boys may change their eating habits and activity levels to improve their physical appearance.

An estimated 72% of US teens send text messages regularly. About one third of them send more than 100 text messages per day! [1]

During the teenage years, young people experiment with new behaviors and can face tremendous peer pressure. In any given month, almost one half of all high school students drink alcohol, and about one in four binge drink. [3]

Almost half of all high school students report that they have had sexual intercourse. [4]

[1] Lenhart, A., Ling, R., Campbell, S., & Purcell, K. (2010). *Teens and mobile phones.* Washington, DC. Retrieved from Pew Internet and American Family Life Project website: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Teens-and-Mobile-Phones.aspx

[2] Rideout, V.J., Foeur, R.G., & Roberts, D.F. (2010). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds: A Kaiser Family Foundation study*. Menlo Park, CA. Retrieved from Henry Kaiser Family Foundation website: www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf

[3] Eaton, D.K., Kann, L., Kinchen, S.A.,et al. (2008). *Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2007. CDC morbidity and mortality surveillance summary* (Report 55(S7-04):1–131). Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/SS/SS5505.pdf

[4] US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2008). Youth risk behavior surveillance – United States, 2007, Surveillance Summaries. (Report MMWR 2008:57(No.SS-4)).

Figuring out what your teenager is feeling, thinking, and wanting can be challenging. It is normal for teenagers to communicate more with their friends than with family, and friendships are often very important at this age. Teenagers tend to have one primary goal—answering the question "Who am I?" So, the more you can understand your teen's behavior as trying on new characteristics to see what "fits" (instead of rebelling against you), the better off you all will be!

Consider the typical changes that occur for teenagers:

Physical

- For girls, puberty usually lasts from age 10-11 to 16. For boys, puberty is often age 11-12 to 17.
- Physical changes in girls include: an increase in body fat, development of breasts, and widening of the hips. The average age for girls to get their first period is 12.
- Common changes in boys include deepening of the voice and increased muscle mass.
- Because of changes in hormones, both girls and boys develop body hair and more body oils (which may cause acne and body odor).
- All children have noticeable changes in their genitals. It's important for parents to discuss these changes in an appropriate manner. See the section in this booklet on "Talking to Your Teen About Sex" for more information on this topic.

Emotional/Social

- Teens start to develop meaningful relationships, such as close friendships and dating relationships. These relationships may be filled with ups and downs and a bit of drama.
- Teens spend much of their time with friends, and peer pressure can become a strong influence. The newly found independence that comes with having a driver's license gives teens even more ability to spend time with their friends. Although many parents report that their teens are never home, teenagers report that their parents are still very important to them.
- Teens are learning how to become adults, and they experiment with new behaviors which may include drinking alcohol, trying drugs, smoking, and/or being sexual. Maintaining open dialogue between teens and parents can help young people make healthy choices.

- In figuring out their sense of self, teens often push the limits and test boundaries, which can cause tension and conflict in their relationships with their parents.
- Shifting and strong hormones may result in mood swings.

Cognitive (Mental Ability)

- Teenagers start to understand the world in more complex ways than before. They often question why rules are made. Although it may feel like they are trying to challenge authority, they may actually be developing abstract ways of thinking. For example, they may ask, “Why it is ok to kill in war but not at other times?"
- Teens develop the mental ability to understand complicated information, such as chemistry, mathematics, and economics.
- Some teens develop a sense of being “invincible”- the belief that bad things will never happen to them (which can help explain why they engage in some risky behaviors).
- Young teenagers often are quite self-centered, thinking the world revolves around them and that they are unique. You may frequently hear, “But, Mom/Dad, you just don’t understand!” As teens mature, they typically become better able to consider the feelings/needs/perspectives of others.
- The teen’s brain is still not fully developed, and some higher skills (such as complex reasoning) may not emerge until the mid 20’s.

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:

- Boys often engage in more risky behaviors than girls.
- Because girls begin puberty earlier than boys, they may feel insecure about their developing bodies.
- Girls are more likely to be influenced by media portrayals of what they should look like, and may develop eating disorders in an effort to maintain an “ideal” (often unrealistic) body weight.

Adapted from: www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/350/350-850/350-850.html
www.welcomebackparenting.org

RECONNECTING WITH YOUR TEENAGER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

So, you get off the plane, run into the arms of your family, enjoy all the homecoming festivities, greet your wonderful children, and suddenly have this amazingly close connection to your kids, know everything about your their unique interests and friends, and are ready to jump into 24/7 family life, 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 teenager can create a strong, happy relationship.

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

- Your teenager may have strong feelings (worry, sadness, anger) about your deployment. He/she may try to keep you "at a distance" to prevent feeling sad if you leave again. Your teen may withdraw from the family, spending more time with friends and at school. On the other hand, he/she may feel angry at you for having been gone and may be more moody and aggressive than usual. Teens may test their limits with you, acting in a defiant way and refusing to follow your directions.

- These reactions can be tough, but it's important to avoid taking the behavior personally. Remember that it may take some time for your teenager to begin to trust and feel close to you. Strive to be patient and understanding.

- Your teen may worry that you're going to be deployed again. He/she may also notice changes in you that are confusing, especially if you're dealing with combat-stress reactions or other challenges of returning from a wartime environment. When young people worry a lot, they may be less able to concentrate on their schoolwork

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TEENAGER ABOUT YOUR DEPLOYMENT

It is very important to talk to your teenager about your deployment. Some parents aren't sure what to say and how to begin the conversation. Here are some helpful tips on how to discuss this topic with your teens.

- Be ready for your teen to ask questions.
    - Your teen's questions may seem random and out of the blue. This is normal, and the questions provide a good opportunity for you to sense how he/she is feeling about your deployment.
    - The questions may also seem direct, challenging, or confrontational. This may be your teen's way of figuring things out, so don't take it personally.
- Introduce the topic yourself.
    - Read books or watch videos (see examples in the Resource List at the end of this booklet) that describe other teens experiencing deployment and reunion. Talking about someone else or a fictional character may be easier for your teenager than sharing his/her own feelings.
    - As a family, write a short book about your family's experience with the deployment(s). Your teen can blog or write a short story about his/her experiences before, during and after the deployment.
    - Look through pictures together of events that took place during deployment – both pictures you took while overseas (not anything that may upset your teen) and those taken back at home of your teenager/family. Pictures can be a great way to start a conversation and to share memories.
- Not sure what to say? Be honest, and talk at your child's level.
    - Use a level of detail that "fits" his/her age and emotional maturity without giving too much information. If you're not sure what is appropriate, check it out with a trusted friend, family member, or healthcare provider.
    - Discuss your perspective on the reasons for the deployment and listen to your teen's perspective as well.
    - Share some of the positive things you did during your deployment, such as re-building a school or helping children.

- Acknowledge that you missed out on a lot in your teen's life.
    - Explain that you are sad that you missed his/her prom, basketball games, and dance recital (etc.), and that you are happy to be home now.
    - Show interest in what your teenager was doing while you were away. Look through pictures and school projects, and ask questions about his/her activities.
- Know that your teen may have strong feelings about your deployment and may fear your leaving again.
    - Try to be open to hearing your teen's feelings about your absence—both his/her pride in your service and sadness at your absence.
    - Teens often worry about the war and whether their parent might be deployed again. Teens may also have strong opinions about the war and may challenge you with their beliefs.
    - If you may be deployed again, emphasize that you are here now and that you will tell your teen if you need to leave again. Also stress that he/she will always be cared for, and say you will take care of him/her during a future deployment.

Final note: In general when talking about deployment, speak in an unemotional, calm way and avoid giving specific details about dangerous situations you may have encountered. If you're struggling emotionally and are unable to talk calmly about your deployment, it may be helpful for your teen to talk to other supportive adults.

TIPS ON STRENGTHENING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR TEENAGER

- Remember that your teenager has changed in many ways while you were gone. It will take time to get to know each other again.
- Try to spend some one-on-one quiet time with your teenager every day, even if just for a few minutes. Ask questions about his/her experiences, and listen carefully to what he/she wants to tell you. Participate in activities your teen enjoys – play a video game, go to the mall, or watch his/her favorite TV show together.
- Express your love and pride in your teenager often. Notice and reward positive behaviors.
- Don't rush into setting new, strict limits or being a harsh disciplinarian—allow your partner to keep that role as much as possible during this time of change. As you gradually move back into this role, try to present a united front with your partner.

- Encourage your teen to ask questions and to talk about his/her feelings or worries, but keep in mind that it may take a while to regain the closeness you may have shared before your deployment(s).
- Encourage your teenager to participate in sports, social and extracurricular activities. When possible, support him/her by attending the events.
- Learn about your teen's friends, and make an effort to get to know their parents/families.
- Address acting-out behavior involving aggression or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly. Parents need to set clear expectations, limits, and consequences for such behavior.
- Some teens may have taken over some adult roles while you were gone and will probably not be eager to give up their independence and control.

Special Tips for Partners/Family Members

- Give your Veteran support in getting to know your teenager again. Encourage him/her to accompany you to your teen's sporting events or activities, and introduce him/her to your child's friends' parents.
- Your Veteran may have some great ideas about how to parent. Your teenager may respond well to these new techniques, so be creative and try them out. Most importantly, you and your Veteran want to discuss parenting issues privately first—then you can provide a united front to your children.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

SPECIFIC ISSUES WITH TEENAGERS

Parenting a teenager can be both challenging and rewarding. This section contains suggestions on how to deal with some of the most common issues faced by parents of teenagers: discipline/limit setting, promoting open communication, building character, and sexuality. If you have concerns about other issues, talk to your teen's healthcare provider and/or look at some of the resources listed in the back of this booklet.

Discipline/Limit Setting

Raising teenagers can be challenging. Consistently applying limits and following through with consequences take a lot of energy and hard work. Discipline is so much more than simply responding to your teen's misbehavior. In fact, the word "discipline" comes from the same root word as "to teach." Discipline can be an opportunity to teach your children about expectations, values, and the impact/consequences of their behavior.

Here are some practical suggestions for disciplining your teenager:

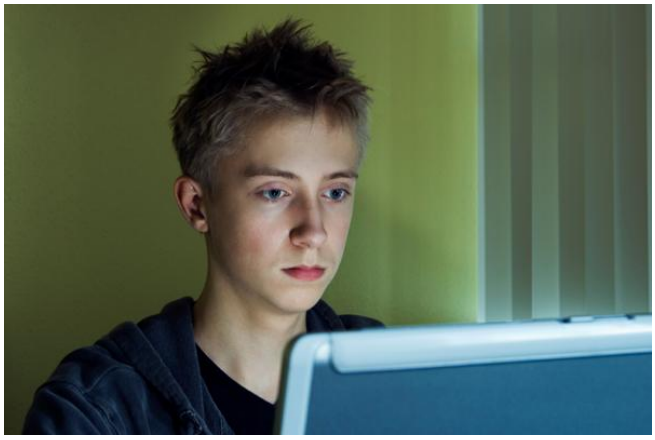
- Model respect, politeness and responsibility. Your behavior speaks volumes more than your words. "Do as I say and not as I do" is confusing and typically does not work!
- Create and communicate clear and consistent rules/expectations. Be clear about the consequences for misbehavior, and be sure to follow through.
- You get more of what you notice. When you see your teenager following the rules or behaving in a respectful manner, praise him/her. Don't let your teen fool you…your praise still matters a lot!
- When your teenager misbehaves, calmly and consistently give a consequence. The most effective consequences are
    - **Immediate**
    - **Related to the problem behavior**
        - ✓ When it is safe and appropriate to do so, let the result of the behavior be the consequence. This is called a "natural consequence." For example, if your teen loses his/her cell phone, he/she should have to raise the money to purchase a new one.
        - ✓ If a natural consequence is not possible, create a consequence related to the problem behavior. This is called a "logical consequence." For example, if your teen is not driving safely, you can take away driving privileges for a set period of time.

- **An opportunity to "make things right."** For example, if your teen steals money from you, he/she could do extra tasks to earn money to pay you back.
- **Delivered in a calm tone (and without lecturing)**. If you become very angry or upset, your teen will be far less likely to learn from the consequence. In fact, he/she will mainly be responding to your anger and may be more likely to continue the misbehavior. On the other hand, consequences presented in a calm fashion can produce learning.

- Keep the lines of communication open, even if your teenager breaks the rules. For example, talk to him/her about your expectations regarding substance use, but encourage him/her to call you if ever in trouble.

- Remember that your teen is soon going to be leaving home and making his/her own decisions. Gradually allowing him/her more freedom and responsibility can help make this transition smoother.

- Monitor your teen's use of the internet and social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace.



  - Keep the computer in a public place (not in your teen's bedroom) so that you can supervise his/her on-line activities.
  - Set time limits for how much time/day your teen can spend on the internet, on social networking sites, on the phone, sending text messages, playing video games (etc.).
  - The best way to learn about your teen's social networking behaviors is to create your own account and access his/her account/page regularly (in fact, we suggest you have a policy that your child must "friend" you so you can see his/her page).
  - Talk openly about the real dangers with sharing private information and interacting with strangers over the internet, and check your teen's accounts regularly.

Communicating With Your Teenager

One of the best gifts you can give your teenager is a listening, nonjudgmental ear. If your teen knows that he/she can come to you and won't be shamed, put down, or teased, he/she is much more likely to share feelings, experiences, and concerns with you. It's much easier to help your child face challenges (that inevitably arise as children grow up) when you can talk openly about the issues—even when you disagree—than to have strained or zero communication. So, how can you create open, healthy lines of communication with your teenager?

- Listen more than you talk.
- Ask your teenager questions.
    - You might ask about their friends, school, Facebook, their soccer game, summer job, favorite music, etc. Take a genuine interest in what matters to your teen.
    - Use the news, media, or events at your teen's school as a springboard for conversation. For example: "I read an article about teen sex the other day that said fewer teens are sexually active…what do you think about this?"
- Many teenagers (especially boys) feel more comfortable talking when they are doing something with another person. So, shoot hoops, go for a walk, play a board game, go for a drive, have a lunch date, or do anything else you both enjoy.
- Try to avoid lecturing. It's easy to fall into lecturing when teens seem be tuning you out. But the more you do so, the more they will probably withdraw, and it can become a vicious cycle. When you have to deliver a consequence, keep it short and avoid lecturing.
- Let your teens know they can come to you, even if they are in trouble, and the earlier the better! Emphasize that you want to be there for them.
- Let your children know you love them, especially if you are going through a difficult time.
- Have dinner together. A growing body of research shows that regular family meals are associated with positive outcomes for teenagers. Sharing this time together creates opportunities to discuss the week's activities and other important things for your family.
- Realize that your teen may feel emotions very strongly, and avoid dismissing or minimizing them. For example, if he/she doesn't make the team, your saying, "I never liked basketball anyway," will shut down the lines of communication and lessen the chance that he/she will open up to you again in the future. Instead, acknowledge what he/she is feeling and be there to listen.

Building Character

All parents want to raise their children with a strong character – children who know the difference between right and wrong, who can stand up for what they value, and who demonstrate loyalty and resilience (getting through tough times). While parenting doesn't come with guarantees, there are some things parents can do to help instill a sense of character in their children.

- Give them responsibilities and opportunities to succeed.

  From taking care of a pet to mowing the lawn to doing laundry, gradually giving your teen responsibilities can build character. Discuss the necessary household tasks, and then together choose some specific activities that your child can assume responsibility for. Praise your children when they do the tasks well.

- Allow them to experience consequences.

  As hard as it may be for you as a parent, remember that teens cannot learn responsibility unless they experience the results of mistakes and irresponsibility. So, try to avoid constantly rescuing your child (of course always being sure he/she is safe). Did your teen forget their lunch money? Don't bring it to them. Did they break or lose their cell phone? Let them know they will need to come up with the money to purchase a new one. While this can be difficult, learning lessons about responsibility now can save your child a lot of heartache down the road (and their future spouses/partners/bosses will probably appreciate it!).

- Volunteer.

  Nothing builds gratitude and perspective like helping others. Encourage your teen to volunteer in an area they care about. From animal shelters to food banks, there are many needs in your community, and your teen can make a real difference. Better yet, commit to regularly volunteering as a family.

- Pay attention to the media your child watches and listens to.

  Research is clear that teens are impacted by the media – music lyrics, TV, movies, video games and the internet. Being a good parent involves monitoring your teen's media usage. Talk to them about the messages they hear, and limit their exposure to violent or highly sexualized materials.

- Encourage positive activities.

  Teens who are involved in positive after-school activities are less likely to abuse drugs/alcohol or engage in early sexual behavior. Encourage your teen to pursue activities that interest them and which promote the development of new friendships, skills, and hobbies.

- Set a good example.

  What you do and how you live are far more important than what you say. Model the behavior and character you want to instill in your children. Support your child in building relationship with other trustworthy, positive role models (such as coaches, teachers, youth leaders).

Talking to Your Teen About Sex

Squirming yet? Talking to your teens about sex can be uncomfortable for both of you, but don't let your anxiety keep you from having these important conversations!

When talking to your teen about sex, there are three important topics to discuss:

- Anatomy: Young people need to know the proper terms for male and female anatomy and have a basic understanding of how intercourse/reproduction works. In our highly sexualized culture, you may be tempted to think that teens automatically have this information, but they often don't (or their understanding is not correct). As parents, you are your teen's best source for realistic, accurate information.

- Safety: From creating appropriate boundaries and learning to say "no," to information about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), it is important that your teenager knows how to practice safe sexual behavior.

- Values: What are your values and beliefs about your teen's sexual behavior? It may not seem that he/she is listening when you talk about sex, but research is clear: teenagers' sexual behavior is influenced by their parents' values. Talking to your teen in a calm, nonjudgmental manner about your values and expectations can make a difference in his/her choices.

Some pointers for the conversation:

- Don't just make it "the talk." Ideally, talking about sexuality will have begun at an early age and continue throughout the teenage years, but it's never too late! Talk about issues related to sex on a regular basis as they come up – on TV shows, in music, as you talk about their friends or the things that happen in school. If your teen is not open to talking, respect this, but revisit the conversation a little later. With each conversation, it will get easier and more comfortable for you both.

- Talk about more than just sex – talk about commitment, closeness, love, goals and all the other things that are a part of healthy intimate relationships.

- Talk about your teen's goals for his/her life and the impact a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or unplanned pregnancy (both for boys and girls) could have on his/her plans.

- If you're not sure what to say, check the parent's resource section at the back of this booklet or your local library. You may want to read the book/pamphlet you suggest to your child before giving it to him/her, and then open a conversation about it later to solicit his/her thoughts and reactions.

- Some teenagers feel more comfortable having tough conversations when they're doing something else while talking. Try talking while shooting hoops, going for a walk, playing a game, or doing some other activity you both enjoy.

- Especially if you are a single parent raising a teen of the opposite gender, it can be helpful to find another trusted adult that your child can talk to about puberty and sex.

- Listen! Talking about sex works best when it is a two-way dialogue, and your teen knows he/she can come to you with questions and concerns. You won't always agree with his/her perspective, but communicating respect will help him/her trust you and risk talking to you again in the future.

- Model the behaviors you value. Want to raise a son who treats women with respect? Check your own behavior and model that respect. Want to raise a daughter with a good body image? Pay attention to what you say about your body and how you treat yourself.

WHAT ARE RED FLAGS FOR CONCERN WITH YOUR TEENAGER?

Sometimes it's really tough to know if your teen's behavior is "normal" or if you should seek professional advice. You know your teen 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 difficulties in teenagers:

- High levels of aggression and/or violence toward people, pets, or property
- Any mention of suicide or harming oneself (such as cutting arms or legs)
- Total withdrawal from the family and refusing to participate in family activities
- Running away (or threats to do so)
- Skipping school
- Considerable drop in grades in school
- Difficulties getting along with peers—or not having any friends and being withdrawn
- Significant changes in friendship groups
- Feeling very sad for a long time (more than just a "bad day")
- Considerable changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Significant changes in weight (gains or losses)
- Alcohol and/or drug use
- Sexual acting out
- Being arrested or having other problems with the law
- Strange or unusual thoughts, beliefs, feelings or behaviors

Remember: Teens (like adults) have bad days—this is normal! Also, you may see more difficulties during the time your family is getting used to being back together after a deployment; these short-term reactions usually go away with time. However, if the problems persist over a couple of months, your teenager may be having a hard time with the changes, and you may benefit from seeking 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 a teenager will likely be more challenging. One of the most important things you can do for your teenager 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 teenager.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS?

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

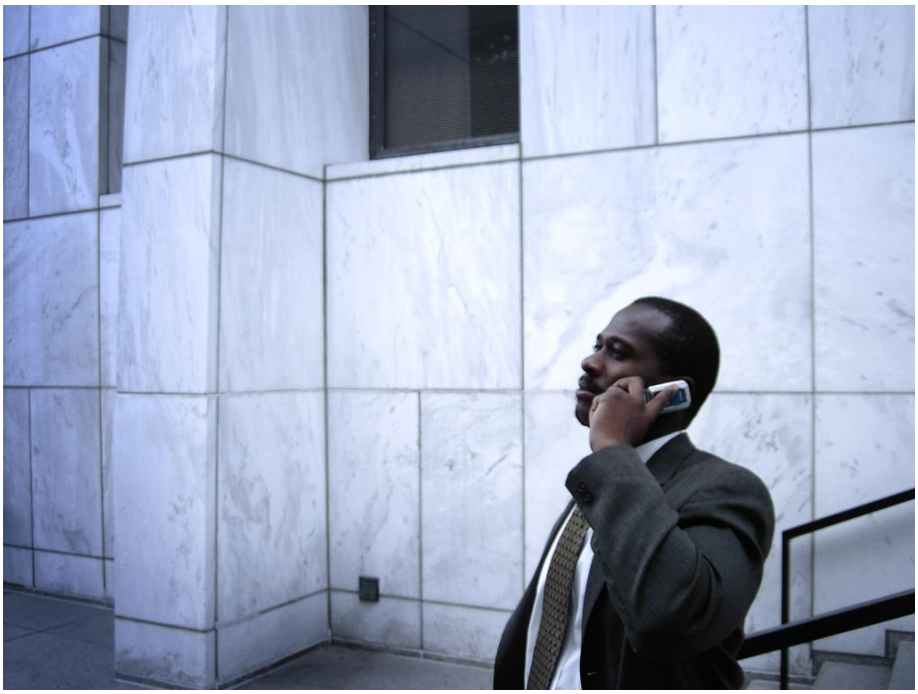
- A friend (especially one who has teenagers)
- A relative
- Someone from a community organization (such as your church, book club, etc.)

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 child's teachers, coaches, or extracurricular leaders

Other helpful resources include your

- Pediatrician or child's doctor
- Nurse line
- Teen's teachers or school counselor
- Mental health professional
- Department of Human Services
- Community/county health department



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 teen'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 and the family out for a fun night to cheer on the local college basketball game. Those special times are great—no doubt—but you typically don't see the many loads of dirty laundry, the arguments over curfew and friends, the parents exhausted from chauffeuring their children to sporting events and helping with homework, the worries about the internet, and the decreased patience they sometimes have with their partner. All those elements of parenting don't look quite as exciting, but are very real, and can be stressful for all parents.

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 should 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:

- Make time for regular physical exercise. Now that your kids are older, you have more time for yourself – take advantage of it! Physical exercise is the very best technique for managing your stress.

- Eat a balanced diet and try to get adequate sleep (7-8 hours per night).

- Work to create some "alone" time every day.

- 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.

- Practice regular relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, prayer/meditation, and muscle relaxation. You may find relaxation audio CDs to be calming as well.

- Parenting a teen often means feeling unpopular or even disliked, so get active in your own activities! Maybe take up a hobby you haven't done in many years. Whatever you do, make sure you have friends/people in your life who love and affirm you and can support you in the sometimes challenging journey of parenting a teenager!

Frustrated when your teenager talks back to you and won't pick up his/her messy room? Do you sometimes feel like your teen knows precisely how to push your buttons? 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?

- 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/ friend).
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member. Ask for help!
- Remember that this is just a season of your life! While 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.

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:

- Surprise your partner and go out for lunch together.
- Have an evening out as a couple or maybe even a get-away weekend if someone can watch your kids.
- Commit to spending 10 minutes as a couple every night. 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.
- Join a couples' Sunday School class at your church/synagogue/house of worship.
- Join a gym/YWCA and regularly exercise together.

Tips for 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 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 specifically 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.

> "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.*

- 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.

- 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 his/her 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 him/her to seek professional assistance at that time.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON ISSUES WITH TEENAGERS

Books for Teenagers to Read

Deployment

Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma. (2006). M. D. Sherman & D. M. Sherman. Seeds of Hope Books. [www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com]

My Story: Blogs by Four Military Teens. (2009). M. D. Sherman & D. M. Sherman. Seeds of Hope Books. [www.SeedsofHopeBooks.com]

Development

The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls. (1998). V.L. Schaefer. American Girl Publishing.

"What's Happening to My Body" Book for Girls (also one for boys) (2007). L. Madaras & A. Madaras. Newmarket.

Building Character

What Do You Stand For? For Teens: A Guide To Building Character. (2005). B. A. Lewis. Free Spirit Publishing.

Books for Parents

The Parents' Guide to Psychological First Aid: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Predictable Life Crises. (2010). G. Koocher & A. LaGreca. Oxford University Press.

Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me & Cheryl to the Mall: A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager (Revised). (2002). A.E. Wolf. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Big Book of Parenting Solutions: 101 Answers to Your Everyday Challenges and Wildest Worries. (2009). M. Borba. John Wiley & Sons.

The Real Truth About Teens and Sex: From Hooking Up to Friends with Benefits--What Teens Are Thinking, Doing, and Talking About, and How to Help Them Make Smart Choices (2006). S.S. Weill. Perigee Trade.

Websites

American Academy of Pediatrics – Healthy Children: www.healthychildren.org

American Academy of Pediatrics (Talking to teens about social networking/internet use): www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/june09socialmedia.htm

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/

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (Talking to your teenager about sex): www.thenationalcampaign.org

The Power of Parents / Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Talking to your teenager about alcohol): www.thepowerofparents.org/high-school-parents