



Family

EMPOWERING THE MOST IMPORTANT UNIT

PARENTING
BY HEIDI LYNN RUSSELL

Rebuilding the Bond

Whether your child is an infant or toddler, consider these pointers to reconnect after an absence

My child was 9 months old when his father left for a deployment to Iraq in 2004. To keep him connected emotionally, I took a large photo of Dad holding the baby and placed it over the diaper-changing table. I wasn't prepared for my baby's response.

When I pointed at the photo on the first day of deployment, he started wailing. For about two weeks after that, every time I pointed and said, "There's Daddy," my child would cry inconsolably. Finally, I hid the photo from his sight.

Such a reaction isn't unusual, according to Denise Daniels, a leading parenting and child development expert whose workbooks have reached more than 15 million children. She's also a pediatric oncology nurse who specializes in child grief.

"A lot of young parents don't understand these kids do grieve and may not understand developmentally what is going on," she says. "Many would be surprised that their little ones were not doing OK at all."

How can you help your baby or toddler through an extended absence and re-establish their bond with you after you return? Here are tips from Daniels and Dr. Mark Pisano, a school psychologist with Fort Bragg (NC) Schools for over 30 years.



INFANTS 1 MONTH TO 1 YEAR

How they'll react

When you leave, Daniels says, your baby has "an experience of loss" but no coping mechanisms. Their emotional reaction is similar to the response by infants who have experienced the death of a parent.

"Sometimes they have a failure to thrive," Daniels says. "It's difficult for them. They don't sleep at night. They don't want to nurse. They don't want to settle down. They have not made the secure attachment bond."

When you return, your baby's predominant emotion is fear of anything unfamiliar. "With a father they've never seen before, you will see a fearful reaction," Pisano says. "The baby is fearful and clings to mom and cries. It's a typical response."

What you can do

The reconnection should occur only at a speed that's comfortable to the child.

"Do not force yourself as a returning parent on the infant," Pisano says. "That is going to be heartbreaking for some service members who want to scoop the kids up and love on them. The child will not react well if they are not ready."

Daniels is a proponent of "skin on skin," in which you cuddle with the baby so your little one becomes familiar with your scent and bonds emotionally. But, like Pisano, she advises going slowly. "Don't say, 'I'm putting the child to bed.' You can be in the room while mom is nursing or doing the bedtime ritual, but take it slow. Everyone needs their space and time to adjust."



TODDLERS 1 TO 3 YEARS

How they'll react

As babies move into toddler years, they are more physically and developmentally ready for visual familiarity, which is why video chatting, such as Skype, is vital, Pisano says.

After you return, however, your toddler may become anxious about losing you again. "Teachers tell me that sometimes the toddlers will refuse to go to day care," Pisano says. "They don't want to leave home thinking dad won't be there again. The child may not get out of the car."

What you can do

Videotape yourself reading a book to your child. Also, leave a T-shirt for a "blanket." Body smell, Pisano says, helps your child recognize you.

For deployments, at-home parents can do future-oriented activities. For example, loosely sewn buttons on a ribbon can be pulled as a countdown. You can also use a jar of gumballs. "They need something concrete," Daniels says.

On return, reassure the child that you aren't leaving, and do three-person activities that include the at-home parent, so your child can ease comfortably into your presence.

