

Renewing Infant Attachment Bond Following Military Deployment

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In 2009, there were over 300,000 infants and toddlers of active duty military members. —E. Carroll, ZERO TO THREE

With military members facing longer and more frequent deployment, military families are faced with the challenge of coping with extended separations and repeated reunions. With the length of deployment averaging 12 months, this process may be confusing for children of military members, especially those of young ages. Even when close parent-child bonds exist prior to deployment, extended absences may negatively impact this bond. Therefore, military members and their families must be patient in the renewal of attachment bonds following the long separation during a military deployment. It is also important to keep in mind that different cultures may experience attachment bonds and reintegration differently than discussed here. Although attachment bonds also exist in adult relationships, the following examples will focus on the bonds that exist between infants and caregivers.

What Is an Attachment Bond?

Emotional ties begin to develop between an infant and his or her caregiver during the first year of life. These ties are known as attachment bonds. Attachment behaviors are those that attempt to bring the caregiver closer to the infant or child. For example, if a baby cries (the infant's attachment behavior), a parent learns if the cry is due to pain, sleepiness, hunger, or boredom. The parent then addresses the infant's cry accordingly (the parent's attachment behavior) to meet the baby's

needs. In turn, the baby is taken care of, but he/she also learns to trust the parent. Such an attachment bond is created over time; the process, based on responsiveness and availability, is ongoing and interactive.

Attachment behaviors promote emotional bonds and closeness.

- Crying
- Smiling
- Looking
- Following
- Embracing
- Clinging



Keep the baby in the mind of the parent, and the parent in the mind of the baby.

—Lynette Fraga, Project Director of Military Projects, *ZERO TO THREE*

The attachment behaviors of both the infant and parent determine whether or not an attachment bond is formed.

Attachment bonds can be secure or insecure. A secure attachment bond refers to one in which the infant feels safe and comforted by the caregiver. This bond develops when an infant trusts that the relationship will remain stable because a parent is repeatedly available and responds to the infant's attachment behaviors in a consistent manner. An insecure attachment bond might occur when a caregiver is consistently unavailable or unresponsive. Infants with insecure attachment bonds typically do not trust their

caregivers or believe that they will be available. Insecure attachment bonds manifest in different ways. For example, children with anxious or ambivalent attachment behavior might act anxious and cling, plead, or call out. Children with avoidant attachment behavior may appear dismissive. These children will avoid eye contact but long to remain close to their parent or caregiver.

With Whom Do Children Have an Attachment Bond?

Although many studies have emphasized the bond between mother and child, research has also revealed that infants form more than one attachment bond. Many children direct attachment behavior to more than one parental figure. Along with mothers, fathers are also likely to become attachment figures during a child's infancy. Attachment bonds may also form with siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or day-care providers.

Why Is an Attachment Bond Important?

The formation of a secure or insecure attachment bond impacts development throughout childhood. Attachment bonds influence personality development that in turn affects how a child functions in social settings. A secure attachment bond

can have a positive impact on many aspects of personality development: sociability, self-esteem, independence, trust, cooperation, and emotional tendencies. Furthermore, these aspects of a child's personality influence the development of independence, the formation of effective peer relationships and positive transitions to school (Thompson, 1999). Children with insecure attachment bonds may face greater difficulty in achieving these developmental milestones.

What Happens to an Attachment Bond during Deployment?

Young children may not fully understand the changes that occur when a parent leaves for deployment. However, an infant or young child may still recognize that a dramatic change has occurred in his or her environment. The deployment of a parent, especially an attachment figure, is one of the most difficult challenges for children in military families. Young children may experience a feeling of loss or insecurity, or a decreased feeling of trust. If addressed inappropriately, these results could have a negative impact on the child's development.

How Do I Renew an Attachment Bond with My Child?

The homecoming of a family member who has been on military deployment can be a time for celebration as well as a challenge for both the child and parent. For example, the many developmental changes that a child can experience while a military parent is away might come as a surprise to the returning parent. Some infants and toddlers may not remember a military parent, depending on the age at which the separation began. When a reinstated parent attempts to resume old routines and previous roles or responsibilities, the child may become confused. Such confusion can cause a child to feel anxious towards the returned parent. Therefore, it is important that the military member be patient as the child becomes re-accustomed to their presence. The family should also be patient with the returning service member after a prolonged absence.

To renew the attachment bond after the return from deployment, military members should be a consistent and responsive caregiver for the child. In addition,

the military member should accept the child's desire for other attachment figures if the child becomes anxious or fearful. Responding to the child's attachment behaviors and accepting the child's limits and boundaries are important steps in renewing the previous attachment bond. For example, when a child cries or reaches for a caregiver, it can be helpful for the returned parent to respond to the child's needs. However, if the child's distress increases, it is important to respect the child's need for an established attachment figure.

Conclusion

The renewal of attachment bonds following a parental separation can be a slow and frustrating process for parents who are anxious to be close with their children. Infants and toddlers may not remember the attachment bond that existed prior to deployment. Unfortunately, a clear-cut "recipe" for forming an attachment bond does not exist, and the time it takes for one to form varies. However, military members who routinely exhibit patience and consistency will begin to see an attachment bond return between themselves and their child.

What can I do to help form an attachment bond?

- Talk in a soft, soothing tone.
- Respond to your child when he or she cries.
- Offer to hold or hug your child when he or she is upset.
- Remain available for when your child reaches for you.
- Refrain from forcing your child into situations where he or she may be uncomfortable.
- Take time to play with your child.



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