

# Military dads have to re-learn parenting after deployment

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Fathers who returned after military service report having difficulty connecting with young children who sometimes don't remember them, according to a study released this week.

While the fathers in the study had eagerly anticipated reuniting with their families, they reported significant stress, especially around issues of reconnecting with [children](#), adapting expectations from [military](#) to family life, and co-parenting.

"A service member who deploys when his child is an infant and returns home when the child is a toddler may find an entirely different child," says lead author Dr. Tova Walsh. "Under these circumstances, fathers find that it takes substantial effort to rebuild their relationship with their child."

The study was published in a special issue of the journal *Health & Social Work* devoted to the needs of military families. About 37 percent of the 2 million U.S. children of service members are under age 6, suggesting that such issues are widespread.

Walsh, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholar, is spending three years doing research at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. For the study, she and colleagues interviewed 14 fathers of children ages 6 and under who were returning from combat deployment. Most were members of the Michigan Army National Guard. The small group was part of a larger study that is

evaluating a group parenting class called STRoNG Military Families.

For some, the reunion with their children didn't go as anticipated. One father told the researchers of coming home to a toddler gripping onto his mother's leg: "He (was) looking at me like, 'Who's that?' She had to tell him, 'That's Daddy.' I have no idea what our relationship would be like if there was no Iraq war."

The fathers reported they wanted to improve their parenting skills, learn to better express emotion and manage their tempers. Half of the fathers met the clinical definition of having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and most of the rest had subclinical symptoms of trauma. Several reported having difficulty staying calm when their [young children](#) acted up, or said they were stressed by their children's behavior.

"The results show that we need to support [military families](#) during reintegration," says Walsh. "Military [fathers](#) are receptive to information and support that will help them understand and respond to their children's age-typical responses to separation and reunion. They all hope to renew their relationships with their young children."

**More information:** [hsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/20/hsw.hlu005.full](https://hsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/20/hsw.hlu005.full)

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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