

“PO AND FRIENDS REINTEGRATION VIDEO” **FACILITATOR’S GUIDE**

“Getting back together as a family after being apart.”

Congratulations. You have in your hands a communication tool to help children deal with reunion issues after family separation. This video has been developed by a group of concerned military professionals and family members who have a passion for helping children deal with family separations. They found that there are plenty of tools to be used for adults, but not so many specifically developed at a child’s level of understanding. Experts say, “If you want to get through to a child, get down on the floor, at their level.” We invite you to do just that with your group. It is our collective dream that you, a family member, family care provider, or simply a concerned community member, will be able to use this child-friendly format to help children deal with issues related to family reunions after long deployments. Welcome to the world of Mr. Po and his puppet friends.



The original team of military professional care providers and community volunteers making this production possible came from Germany, but eventually included volunteers from the world over. Volunteers, both military and civilian, from all Services and walks of life, reviewed the script and its content to be sure that it addressed real issues of children undergoing separation from family members. Children and their families were asked to read the script to ensure it was useful and accurate (see script credits). Participants weren’t professional actors, puppeteers or video production technicians, but just regular, concerned people like you. They pooled their talents with the intent of providing a learning tool that would engage children and their families, in a format that would allow them to speak out and address worries, fears, and concerns surrounding impending or actual separation from loved ones (parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, guardians, etc.).

Whether you are using this video in your home, or as part of a community reintegration program sponsored by a family care provider or military readiness group, we suggest that you follow these guidelines:

1. Review the video before using it. It was developed and funded with a military chaplain's grant. Imbedded in the script are references to prayer and to God. Make sure they are acceptable for your presentation and audience.
2. Assess your target group, their environment and phase of deployment cycle they are currently in (see Deployment Cycle handout). This may influence which sections of the DVD video you decide to use at this time. It was written specifically to be used during the sustainment phase of deployment, just before redeployment, but can be used at any time. Content was written to target reunion issues at the developmental level of an elementary age child, 6-12 years of age, to generate further discussion. It can be viewed in small or large groups, together with family, friends, teachers, clergy, and/or specific military units.
3. This DVD video can be used by viewing the program in its entirety with follow-up discussion at later date and time, or by pausing as needed to interject additional information, asking questions pertinent to the viewing audience. The program has three separate sections with vignettes that can be played on separate occasions, if limited time is a factor (I.e. for an elementary school or Sunday school class presentation). Mr. PO, the narrator puppet, will summarize each section, indicating good places to pause and have a discussion, if you wish. If staff resources and time permit, consider breaking up into small groups and ask questions, eliciting personal reactions to what they have just seen. In this way, you may identify children with more serious personal issues, who might benefit from additional help dealing with reintegration. Knowing the point-of-contacts (POCs) in your community; chaplains, teachers, doctors, social workers, unit and school counselors, who you could refer the child and family to, would be very helpful.
4. Example discussion questions for each of the three sections have been provided to assist you in facilitating meaningful discussion. By all means, rephrase the questions to suit your group's situation and add others, as appropriate.

Additional information is provided on the DVD. Contact numbers for the originators of the script and video are provided along with the script. You may find them useful POCs for how to market and put on a production in your community, whether it be with the DVD or 'live.' Enclosures with this guide also provide information on the deployment cycle phases, depression signs and symptoms, and reference materials.

SECTION CONTENT/ CONCEPT **& DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

SECTION #1, SCENES 1-6

Family relationships are strained by deployments. While adults are able to handle most changes and make necessary adaptations, children may have a much more difficult time accomplishing them without outside help.

Children are certainly aware that things are different; that their world has changed (or is changing), but they don't always know why. Children are prone to believe that they, personally, had something to do with causing the negative feelings generated by family separations.

PO and friends discuss the questioning phase and deal with some healthy ways families can anticipate and deal with separation, maintain contact while separated, and prepare for family reunions.

DISCUSSION: Ask questions dealing with how the children are feeling and understanding the situation they are now in. Responses should be affirming, modeling healthy ways families deal with separation. This would be a good time to go over the normal reactions of people going through a separation/deployment, if it hasn't been discussed before. (See Deployment Cycle handout.)

Example questions:

1. Has it been the same for you? How has your life (how have you) changed?
2. How has it been different (or the same) for you than for Billy?
3. What are you feeling? Why do you think you feel the way you do?
4. What things did you do getting ready for your dad or mom to go? What have you done since they left?
5. Did anybody have fights and get angry with anyone before they left?
6. Anyone have a situation like Frankie, with homework, and getting mad?
7. Moms, can you relate to the mother's comments?
8. How did you stay in touch with your deployed parent?
9. What do you think the deployed person has been thinking?
10. How has your mom or dad at home handled the situation? (How are they doing?)
11. Has anyone been worried or scared?
12. Does belief in God help a person when someone is gone for a long time?

SECTION #2, SCENES 7-8

Every family has in its structure the individual or individuals who provide the basis of authority and discipline. When a family member in authority is separated, the authority structure changes, if only temporarily. Each family situation is different concerning who now becomes “in charge” during this time of family transition.

Those who become the “in charge” parent by default assume the roles and responsibilities of those absent, but are not always aware of the dynamics of family change. The person who has separated from the family has not ‘officially’ relinquished this responsibility, unless it was specifically talked about, and in this sense, do not appreciate a change in their family role.

The re-shifting of authority that occurs when a family is reunited may cause emotional stress for everyone, with an inability to adjust to the new family configuration. The person returning may feel unneeded, or not appreciated, and those who filled in may feel usurped and not appreciated or cared about as well.

One of the most sensitive situations is where we put expectations on an older sibling to care for the younger ones to “help out.” They invariably mature with this responsibility and this may not be recognized by the returning parent. The older child should also be allowed to regress for a time and “be a kid again,” without getting “in trouble,” but may also want to retain some of that learned responsibility, if appropriate.

Many families have children go to stay with grandparents or other guardians, especially if they have a single parent or dual military parents. The child may have been “getting away with things” that the parent wouldn’t have allowed. They may have developed “bad habits” that will now need to be reversed. The child needs to know this was temporary and will now need to return to doing things their parent’s way.

Example questions:

1. Who’s been “in charge” in your house during this time? Who will be “in charge” when mom or dad gets home again?
2. Has anyone had to take care a younger brother or sister during the deployment? Have any of you younger kids been “bossed around” by the older ones?
3. Has anyone been living in a different place during the separation?
4. Have you been able to “get away with” things during this time you couldn’t before? Will that stay the same, do you think?

SECTION #3, SCENES 9-12

Family intimacy, sharing of time and affection, changes depending on family dynamics before separation and the relative ages of the family members. Also, returning service members may have experienced things while deployed that will make them less able to be emotionally available than they were before. Unrealistic expectations are common that things will be “better than ever,” or will go back to feeling like it did before right away. The “honeymoon period” is often short-lived, and then problems that were there before the deployment resurface.

Families should discuss how “routines” have changed. Any family member can feel, inappropriately, that they are no longer needed or appreciated, by the family. This can trigger feelings of depression rather than feelings of closeness. Children may feel angry that the parent has returned, removing a privilege they’ve become used to, leading to statements like, “I wish you’d never come home.” This can be prevented by daily opportunities to express honest feelings. Symptoms of depression should be reviewed and family members encouraged to watch for them in each other (see Enclosure B).

Family time spent preparing for separation and the reunion will determine the length of time needed for healthy family readjustment to occur. Expectations are often unrealistic about how initial time will be spent together and how affection will be shown. All should prepare for a gradual readjustment in these areas. Current thinking is that the deployed service member shouldn’t be separated from the family at first to “put things away,” nor should they be thrown back into the family situation full time, but gradually, by half days. “Block leave” comes later. The tendency is to rush things, and want to get back to “normal” as soon as possible, when that old “normal” no longer exists. Balancing time alone and together helps everyone adjust in a healthy way.

Example questions:

1. Have things changed around your house? What’s the same? Different? What things will go back to the way it was before? What things do you want to stay changed?
2. Were there any things causing problems before mom or dad left that you’ll want to talk about when they get back?
3. What’s the first thing you’re going to do with them when they get back?
4. How long will they be at work when they get back? Will they be home a lot? (Discuss the local unit or command’s plan and philosophy on reintegration.)
5. How can you show someone you missed them and still needed them while they were gone?
6. How can you recognize that someone in the family is feeling depressed or sad?
7. How does going to a place of worship help a family adjust?
8. How long do you think it’ll be before things get “back to normal” for you?