

Military Families Learn To Live With ‘New Normal’

Jacki Lyden, host. March 21, 2009, Weekend All Things Considered

JACKI LYDEN, host: Here in America, the weight of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan falls heavily upon military families, especially children. Commentator Rebekah Sanderlin's husband has finished three tours in Afghanistan. She wonders how that life will affect their two young children, Beau(ph) and Rudy(ph).

REBEKAH SANDERLIN: We are living in the new normal. That's what the experts tell military families. What that really means is that this, this intense life of repeated deployments, of prosthetics, of memorial services, this is what life is going to look like for us from now on, so we had better learn to deal with it.

Living In The New Normal is also the name of a program that schools near Fort Bragg use to help military kids deal with trauma and loss. But most young military children don't know that their lives are unusual now. They can't remember life before mommies and daddies went off to war. As awful as it sounds, this is normal for them, the old normal. It's not even new anymore.

About two months ago, my husband came home from his third deployment to Afghanistan. Since then, we've settled into familiar routines. Still, our 4-year-old son asks me almost every day if Daddy has gone to work for the day or for longer.

His little mind can't figure out if he'll see Daddy at dinnertime or not again until another Christmas has passed. He panics when he thinks that he didn't get to say goodbye. How can I explain the difference between a deployment and a work day to a kid who can't even tell time? My little boy is also wrestling with concepts that he doesn't have the vocabulary to express.

He says things like, I'm sad, but he can't articulate why. When my husband was in Afghanistan, my son tried to convince me that he was big enough to fight the bad guys with Daddy. He would say, I'll push those bad guys down, punch them in the butt, and call them peanut butter and jelly head. These were the worst things he could imagine doing to another person.

Three times now, my son has had to trade his happy, intact, safe family for one where one parent is a grainy, time-delayed face on Skype, and the other is lonely, exhausted and worried.

My daughter didn't meet her father until she was almost 5 months old. She was born during his most recent deployment. For the first months of her life, she knew her father as an 8-by-10 picture taped to the backseat of the car. She had almost no contact with men, so every time she heard a male voice, she would become startled, and her eyes would widen.

She has grown familiar with my husband's voice now, but she still stares at him like he's a rare, precious specimen.

My children won't have the carefree, idyllic childhood that I had. I try my best to make their memories happy ones, and their days are very rich in other ways. They'll grow up with a higher sense of community, purpose and responsibility than I had, but they'll also have memories of soccer games and dance recitals with an empty seat beside Mom.

They will remember the bitter pain of hugging their father goodbye, knowing that they'll be 3 inches taller when they see him again. They will remember that some of their friends never got to see their fathers again.

Military families are in uncharted territory here, and that frightens us. We don't know what long-term effects this lifestyle will have on our children. I don't think any of us like this, and maybe that's why we've resisted accepting it for so long. But we are living in the new normal, and we had better learn to deal with it.

LYDEN: Our commentator, Rebekah Sanderlin, writes the blog Operation Merit for the Fayetteville Observer newspaper in North Carolina.