

Better Health for Life from
Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network



Tending the Homefront

*When a soldier leaves for war, the whole family is affected—
as this local family discovered*

When Tammy Heidecker's husband, Joe, was deployed to Iraq with the Army National Guard, she knew the next 14 months were going to be difficult. The mother of two daughters, Sarah, 8, and Grace, 2, took a leave of absence from her career as a school teacher and became a full-time mother...and father. "It's been a busy year," Tammy admits. "I literally fall into bed at the end of the day."

The absence of a husband and father in the Heideckers' Northampton home began to take its toll soon after Joe's departure. Sarah became depressed and would cry for her Dad before bedtime. In the morning, she would refuse to go to school. Many military families experience similar problems, says psychiatrist Joel Lerman, M.D., of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. "Children need to see and touch a loved one to really stay connected to them."

Even during her own birthday party, Sarah remained unhappy. That's when Tammy decided to seek professional help. She brought Sarah to see her school counselor and a psychiatrist. "Counselors use different methods, even games, to help kids talk about their emotions," Lerman says.

With counseling, Sarah began to improve. Phone calls and e-mails from her dad are helping the weeks pass more quickly. She even started writing about her feelings in a highly confidential "daddy journal." Tammy says, "I'm not even allowed to read it."

A support group for Army National Guard families is helping Tammy get through the final months of her husband's deployment. She even learned how to answer her children's difficult questions. When they ask, "Why can't Daddy quit and come home?" she responds, "Because Daddy's job is very important. He's protecting our country. He's a hero." Lerman says these answers help children take pride in their parent's work.

The message is getting through. During a school project, Sarah picked her dad as the person she thinks most deserves to carry the Olympic torch.



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Healthy You

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While Sarah looks forward to the day her father comes home, both parents realize his return may be the start of another challenging period. “When a parent returns home after a long period of time, it upsets the family routine,” Lerman says. “The parent may look and act different, and very young children may actually be meeting their parent for the first time.” Lerman suggests taking it slow and allowing a new relationship to develop gradually.

How the girls respond to Daddy’s return home is yet to be seen. However, for Joe, one thing is sure. “When he returns home,” Tammy says, “he said he’s going to sit on the couch for a week and just watch his kids play.”



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