Today on across the fence we help celebrate April as the month of the military the child. One of the key programs supporting our military families is Operation: Military Kids or OMK. Up OMK is a national program that connects and supports military families and communities. In Vermont OMK is led by the UVM extension 4-H program with partners business and other youth serving organizations. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. During the military deployments over the past three years across the fence I shared with you several programs about operation military kids with the homecomings in recent months you might think that the work of OMK is over but the reality is that many military families are readjusting to the fact that that their service member has returned home. OMK is ready to help. With me is Stephanie Atwood who is the UVM extension 4-H OMK coordinator and alongside Stephanie Ms. Callie Frey. Callie is an AmeriCorps Vista member serving with OMK. Welcome to both of you thanks for being with us. Stephanie a lot of people might assume because a service member is back that everything is back to normal at home but that's really far from the case.

Stephanie.: Yeah that can be true some cases but I think a better way of looking at it is that the normal that used to be before the deployment may not be the same normal that works after the deployment. Family's go through a lot of changes home a home in any given year. We go through changes in the year and that's when we're together so for a family to have a key member absent physically for that year to bring them back home is an exciting time it's joyous it's happy but it can also be really stressful as that family learns to come back together learn to work as a unit. They are renegotiating those same routines.

Judy.: Because everybody's in a different role.

Stephanie.: Absolutely up that so that's why what used to be normal up those roles from before may not work anymore so by accepting this new normal I think is a kinder way to look at it. Our goal here today is to help Vermonters military and non-military alike military families are still going through transitions no matter what phase of the deployment they are in and our military kids need our support just as they have throughout the whole process.

Judy.: There are different ways to support different age groups as well?
Stephanie.: Absolutely yes.

Judy.: Because everybody is affected.

Stephanie.: Yes.

Judy.: You brought some slides today that are going to help us understand some of the reactions and things that the military child might be experiencing let’s get started with that.

Stephanie.: Sounds great.

Judy.: So we start with the infants.

Stephanie.: Yes you'll see on the screen the way we haven't laid out on the left hand side are some of the reactions that infants may be having two the reunion phase. Infants as with any change you'll see these types of reactions. You're going to see crying fussing pulling away they may not recognize that parent who has been gone.

Judy.: That has to be a hard one.

Stephanie.: Absolutely especially for the service member who may not have even met the child. They were born when they’re gone so to come home to a child who doesn't recognize them at all that can be really painful. They may cling to the parent who stayed behind also you may see the change in sleep and eating patterns and then like I said before they may not recognize that returning parents so on the right hand side of the screen you will see some techniques. These techniques are helpful I think for any child care provider. Anyone in with infants but also they can be shared with the parents specifically. Techniques takes time when. Hold the child as much as they will allow who interact with them as much as you can have and relax and be patient it takes time.

Callie.: Looking at our next age group a 1 to 3 bears going to be a lot of similar reactions. Shyness one kids are also going to cling to that returning parent not recognizing the returning parent I grew up as a military child and you one of my parents favorite stories is when my dad returned team had a mustache he didn't have a mustache the money left are and apparently I was terrified of him. I wouldn't let him kiss me good night or anything like that I just freaked out and he eventually decided to shave it. I know it was a hard decision for him because people told him he looked like Burt Reynolds which is a big deal but ages 1 to 3 you don't have a really understand crying and having those temper tantrums and for a lot of kids behavior regression. Parents want to go back to the beginning of that year they're going to treat their kids home off as a they had before they left home and kids will go back two thumb sucking that letting and looking at the techniques making sure not to force anything on kids giving them the time to warm up to you being gentle and fun and .meeting them at their level.

Stephanie.: I think being positive. If adults can be positive I think that kids can feed off of that energy. I think that goes for most age groups too.

Judy.: It must be hard for the parent not to feel guilty for or take it personally when the babies are acting this way.
Stephanie.: And what's interesting is that kids will feel that same sense of guilt and away. Moving on to the preschoolers the 3 to 5 year olds a lot of times like Cali said before that they do not understand and they are not able to see the connection they don't know why their turn left and they in some cases may feel as though it was their fault.

Callie.: There's one example that we heard of a younger child who his father ended up going off to the gulf war. They explain it to him, sat down with him and he was so angry at his parents. They just did and understand the and came to realize a couple months later that he thought his dad was playing golf this entire time you're choosing to play golf rather than to be with me so he was communicating with the children and trying to help them understand at that age.

Judy.: I would imagine this is good advice for anybody who is involved with the family's in deals with the children. Maybe its friends who have kids and similar play groups or day care providers for them to realize in understand what's happening with the child.

Stephanie.: Absolutely and that's why we share slides like this. We will go through some techniques how to connect with the children how the parents can connect but understanding what they're going through is huge and I think it helps us to understand why it is that they need our support. If we're going back to the 3 to 5 year olds and common reactions you can see some kids will really need proof they want to test and want to know even poke or touch they're demanding they want proof that their parent is there and they're going to stay there. You can also see some acting out. If you go to the next slide we will see some of the reactions on the left side we've recapped some of those same reactions that I just went through but on the right side are some techniques that we can use. Listen that goes without saying I think both family members listen to the kids listen to what they're saying but also those folks who work with those kids on a daily basis. Accept the feelings whenever they're going through whether it's negative are positive there's going to see a whole range of emotions and it's important to know it understand it and deal with it as you can. Play with them they want to be active they want to get out there has and they want that attention. Like we said they want the proof that their parent as real so spending time is key. Asking about their interests and yes that last one on the page assure them that the absence was not about them. I think that's something that childcare providers and teachers can really reinforce.

Judy.: These are not necessarily issues that all come to a forefront at once. This is ongoing different stages I would imagine that each kid goes through.

Stephanie.: Yes this phase of reunion homecoming reintegration can last up to six months or beyond. You may not see some of these reactions right off the bat like he said. They may surface a little bit later or maybe not.

Judy.: You mentioned listening is really important. Sometimes it's more than just what the child is saying it's also how they're acting.

Stephanie.: Yes absolutely and I think we're going to move on to the 5 to 12 year olds.

Callie.: Looking at the 5 to 10 year olds you are going to get numerous reactions. When a parent first returns that excitement the child is going to run and greet them but this last further pass that. The anticipation and excitement every time they see that parent for a
while and also they're going to feel guilty that they didn't do enough that they weren't good enough when the parent was gone. See their role was when the parent was gone to take up the trash and there were a couple times that they didn't and for some kids that's going to stick with them and they're going to think I didn't live up to the standards that I was supposed to. Looking at disciplined how the child is disciplined sometimes I know for me my mom would be like just wait until your father returns if I did something wrong so that didn't happen that often but looking at that and realizing that can stay with you after a while and oh my gosh my mom told me that numerous times that's dad is going to be so upset home a home. For a lot of kids boasting about service parents is a huge sense of pride they won a share that with their friends and talking a lot bringing the parent up to speed on everything that is happened while they're gone. A year or depending how long that parent has had gone a lot happens. That's where it's very important for the kids and parents to listen you read.

Judy.: As adults we have the perspective of the year and a life for children a year is a huge amount of time.

Callie.: It's huge yes.

Judy.: Let's move on two the teenage years because in a good situation in the best of circumstances this is a very challenging time in a person's life.

Stephanie.: Oh yes it's hard to be a teen just normally. You'll see down below the 13 to 18 year olds how they're adjusting. They might be excited. If the relationship with their parent was positive beforehand then they will expect it to be positive when they come back. Also teens do not like to show emotions sometimes or maybe they'll show really strong emotions.

Judy.: It depends what day it is.

Stephanie.: Absolutely. But like Callie mentioned for the previous age group they may feel guilty for not living up to their standards. They have had to be the man of the house or the mother of the house or whenever. They may have had to fill big shoes wilder parent was gone. And that's huge.

Judy.: Or take more responsibility then the younger siblings.

Stephanie.: Yes absolutely. So some techniques we can use to help the teenage years. Talk with them like with any of the ages. Active listening. Active listening is huge. Hear them hear what they say do not be judgmental. They have gone through a lot of changes this year they may have made some decisions that you're not as a service member too happy with but except those and talk to them about it. Folks who work with youth on a daily basis teachers help them to understand that transition. 13 to 18 year olds they get it. They understand so you can have a real conversation with them and help parents to get involved with their kids' education. I think that we huge for this age group too.

Judy.: And when they come to you and say it's a fine year everything's great no problem then you know you need to sit down and talk a little more about that and it's OK to say you had a tough year and all feel guilty.
Stephanie.: Yes absolutely I think with a lot of the age groups helping them to not feel guilty is huge and that's where we as community members can come in and show them that we care. We know that they've gone through a really difficult time and helping them to navigate successfully navigate reunion in this phase we're seeing a lot of service members going through right now. Helping them successfully navigated the phase can help our kids succeed and you can become as a child I think it can be a positive experience too.

Judy.: There are some pretty big benefits for kids that have gone through this. To learn about themselves and their families.

Stephanie.: There coming more mature they're looking tortes the future. We go through a lot of stressful periods through our lives and deployment is not easy. I think it can really prepare kids for the future so I think that's huge.

Judy.: Before we go operation military kids needs continued support obviously because deployments are continuing and these are issues that are going to keep coming up for family's so what can we all do as community members to help?

Stephanie.: We can give back. We're always looking for volunteers. Making the connections with the family's in your neighborhoods. You may not know them you may know who they are but we're here connect with us and hopefully we'll be able to make the right connections and help them and support them.

Judy.: For more information on four H operation military kids you can check the UVM extension web site which is listed on your screen. You can also call the state four H office toll free at 1-(800)-571-0668 that's 1-(800)-571-0668. Thanks for both coming on and talking about this it's so important for so many families. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence

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