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Strategies for Staying in Touch

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Many families find themselves being separated by distance at some point in their lives. Job requirements, further education, career changes, military assignment, and other situations arise where one person in the family needs to leave temporarily. Below are some ideas for staying in touch that come from mainly military sources. Because separation, reunion, and transitional times are more common in that occupation, much research has been conducted for their families. These ideas can be used for anyone as they travel. See which ones you might like to try:

- Plan in advance how you will most likely be communicating. Make a date for phone calls. Talk about sending letters and pictures and be sure to follow through. Take a tape recorder and send tapes to children. Young children will be able to communicate through tape much better than through letters.
- Write regularly! Frequent short notes are much better than occasional long letters. Choose a schedule and do your best to stick to it.
- Write to each person separately. This will help them realize that you value them as individuals (especially important with children) but consider mailing them all together so no one is left out.
- Before you leave, tape (either video or audio) several stories or songs for children and special poems or messages for your other family members. In letters or phone conversations, reveal where you have left these tapes, so that they can have a special surprise.
- Take pictures of your daily activities. Remember, what you are doing is very different from the life you left. Everyone at home would like to see the places you have been, what things are the same, and what are different from home. If you are traveling state-side consider start-

ing a collection of something from the different states to share with the children. Make it into a game so they can see the travels on a map or chart.

- Describe your duties and environment. Describe your schedule and how it differs from what everyone else might be doing at the same time at home.
- Send a fax or e-mail often, just to let your family know you are thinking of them. If you have the technology, use the web cam on your computer or camera phone to share pictures of landmarks or allow your family to send you photos. Consider a family web page to keep in touch. You can utilize technology to scan report cards or newspaper clippings to provide current daily events that help to make the absent partner aware of family activities. If time allows, consider a computer class to teach everyone the skills that might make communication easier and more effective.

Make Plans for Your Homecoming

Use maps and postcards or photographs to make your destination and return tangible. This is helpful for everyone to visualize where you are, what the time is, what the climate is like, what the food is like, and other important changes in your lifestyle.

Use a calendar to mark the return date. Make it a special part of the day to cross off another day and remind family members of the homecoming time.

Plan the homecoming so that everyone knows what to expect. If travel is a necessary part of your job, begin some family traditions, such as wearing a certain color or article of clothing to the airport or bus terminal, or preparing a favorite food.

Research indicates that planning ahead helps to facilitate a successful homecoming. If this is after months of

separation, the homecoming might be more celebrated than if it's been two weeks and they know you will be leaving again in four days. Talk about what expectations are and how you want your family's routine to develop.

Realize that it is normal to feel out of touch with your spouse and family when returning. Depending on the time you have been gone, daily life has gone on and coping skills have been developed. Be patient and understanding as the family unit blends together again. Keeping good communication, a positive attitude, and a strong support system will help to make the transitions of a family member coming and going easier for the whole family.

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August 2007—3466