

The New York Times

Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

JANUARY 8, 2009, 11:53 AM

When Daddy Goes to War

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

I wrote a while back about [families divided by distance](#). This weekend, the Style section ran a similar [article](#) on how work keeps some parents thousands of miles away from their spouse and children.

What the rest of us consider burdensome and newsworthy, however, military families see simply as “the way things are.”

Motherlode’s guest blogger this week is [Anita Tedaldi](#), a “military wife” and mother to five daughters (ages 6 months through 8 years), in a small town in Florida. Her husband, who is with the Air Force, is heading back to war this week. For security reasons, she can’t tell us exactly where she lives and he can’t tell her exactly where he’s going.

WE DON’T WANT A “COMPUTER-DADDY”!

By ANITA TEDALDI

When my daughter heard that my husband was leaving again for the war she was excited. Last time he came back, she got a bag full of Hershey kisses. She wasn’t thinking about the long months ahead when she cries every night because he can’t tell her his “Sammy Snake” stories, a bedtime tradition in our home.

Daddy being “at the war” is a familiar concept in my household, and each of my five daughters tries to wedge it into familiar concepts. So my 5-year-old, who understands that Daddy has to go to war because of his job, asks me if his boss can move the war to the office, or better yet, to our neighborhood — but not the backyard because that would interrupt her playing — so he can come home at night.

On the other hand, my oldest daughter, who is 8, is so matter of fact about my husband’s deployments that she can seem downright jaded, until she asks out of the blue, “Daddy’s guns are invincible, right?”

Mostly, their misunderstandings make for cute stories, but sometimes their innocence hits hard. The one that really got me was my 4-year-old’s reaction to a video of her father. On a recent deployment, he found a free USO program that videotapes servicemen reading a story and sends DVDs home to their kids along with the book.

When the package arrived and I put the DVD in our computer, the girls’ eyes widened upon seeing their dad dressed in his desert gear, and I could see that my oldest two were

taken aback. It looked so ... war-like. But they listened to the story, saw him smile and seemed satisfied. My 4-year-old, however, looked puzzled.

She was silent for a bit, and then asked, “Is this a real Daddy, Mommy? Our real Daddy?” “I’m not sure what you mean sweetie — that’s Daddy. He recorded a video, and sent it to us. It’s your Daddy.”

My daughter wasn’t satisfied with this reply. She asked again if this was the real Daddy. I pretty much repeated my answer.

She suddenly yelled, “I don’t want this Daddy, I want the real one! That one that was here before. I don’t want this computer Daddy. Is the real one coming back?” Tears came running down her face.

Of course she didn’t want a computer Daddy, and I tried to assure her that the real Daddy would be back in the flesh soon enough. I wanted to acknowledge how hard it was, her dad being gone for so much of her young life, but I also wanted to shelter her from the fear she was experiencing, perhaps because I didn’t want to acknowledge my own fear. Sure he’d be home soon, right?

When I have these doubts, I wonder if I am doing a good job helping my children deal with their own emotions. Am I giving them too much information? Maybe too little? Will this be the topic of future therapy sessions?

Once I got the kids to bed, I sat down with a glass of wine, and after fruitlessly willing the phone to ring, hoping to hear my husband’s voice, I watched computer Daddy on my own. I agreed with my daughter, I wanted the real one back too.