Parental Re-integration: What to do When a Parent Returns After a Lengthy Absence?
By James L. Stovall, M.Div.

Melinda was only one when her parents divorced. When she was two, her father, a career military man, was sent to fight the war in Iraq. Now nearly four, Melinda is just getting to know her father. The fact that Melinda’s father is willing and able to re-connect with his daughter, is potentially a very good development for Melinda. Unfortunately, the process of reintegration is not easy for either parent or children. The question faced by Melinda’s parents concerning how her father can re-connect with his daughter, is one that millions of families face due to a variety of circumstances that take a parent away for several months or even years at a time. The process of re-integrating an absent parent back into the life of a young child is challenging and is full of dangers that go beyond the ordinary difficulties of parenting.

Reasons for a parent’s absence may include: 1) military service 2) imprisonment 3) illness, including recovery from substance abuse 4) job responsibilities 5) running away from the pain of a divorce. From a child’s perspective, the reasons for the parent’s absence may not be as significant as the parent’s current desire to be involved in the child’s life. Child development specialists agree that children benefit greatly when they have two parents that are actively involved in the child’s life, regardless of the marital status of the parents.

Factors that influence a re-integration process include: 1) the relationship of the returning parent with the parent that has been present 2) the relationship between the child and the absent parent that may have existed before the extended absence 3) the parenting skills of the returning parent 4) the ability or willingness of the returning parent to be physically present to the child on a consistent and regular basis 5) the extent to which reintegration involves the child.
establishing a new home with the returning parent 6) the economic, social and psychological stability the child has experienced in the past.

If the process of re-integration is full of conflict between the parents, the child may associate the returning parent with the conflict that his return creates. This linkage can cause permanent harm to the parent-child relationship and doom the process of re-integration. At an emotional level, the returning parent has to re-establish trust with the child. Trust does not happen instantly and cannot be forced on a child. Trust on the part of the child will develop only after the formerly absent parent demonstrates through consistent actions a desire and commitment to be a fully present parent.

One pitfall that may arise in connection with reintegration is referred to as the "Disneyland dad" syndrome where the returning parent, perhaps based upon a sense of guilt over having been absent, attempts to re-establish a relationship by buying the child’s affection with lavish gifts or a party atmosphere that lacks appropriate boundaries.

Parents should work together to develop a re-integration plan that is appropriate for the age of the child and the unique needs of the child. At a minimum, any plan for re-integration of an absent parent should include: 1) a commitment to work together for the benefit of the child or children 2) a gradual, phased –in plan that involves the returning parent in increasingly lengthy periods of time with the children 3) a commitment to maintaining a regular schedule for the children in which both parents have significant time with the children 5) a plan for who will be responsible for making major decisions for the children concerning their health, education, religion and general welfare 6) a plan for financial support for the children.

Mediation is an informal decision-making process in which parents can come together in a relaxed atmosphere and, with the help of a neutral third party, make
plans for re-integration that are mutually acceptable to both parents and reflect the best interests of the children. Mediation is often used in situations where difficult emotional issues that exist between the parents are having a negative effect on the children. Children may often feel caught in the middle or even blame themselves when parents fight. Mediation goes a long way toward helping parents to focus on the needs of the children and get beyond the blame and anger that they may feel toward one another.

The absent parent often feels excluded from the child’s life and may blame the other parent for those feelings. The parent that has been present may feel overburdened for having carried a disproportionate share of the parenting responsibilities during the absence of the other parent. If the re-integration process can be done with some degree of cooperation between the parents, the children will be able to accept the absent parent and benefit from their involvement.

*Mr. Stovall is Director of the Mediation Institute in Oklahoma City. For the past 15 years, he has been assisting couples in making difficult decisions related to parenting in connection with divorce, separation or other family conflicts. Mr. Stovall can be reached at (405) 607-8914 or e-mail at j_stovall@site.net. His website is www.mediationinstitute.net.*