

# Parent/Leader Discussion Guide

## *We Serve Too!*<sup>™</sup>—The Homecoming Box

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Guide for parents and leaders to help understand object of The Homecoming Box Workshops

This book tells the story of children attending a *Homecoming Box* workshop. Brief instructions for hosting your own such event are included in an appendix in the back of the book, and in this book guide we will expand on some of the things we have learned in our workshops.

A premier principle of this project (which is as hard for adults as it is for children) is this: **Slow Down!** Kids are trained to be occupied every second, so prepare them for slowing down by explaining it to them: *"We will be taking our time today"; "There is no need to rush," "If we see you rushing, we will slow you down"; and, " These boxes are very special keepsakes—something you might like to keep for your own children to look at someday. You will have stories from a very special period of your life stored inside these boxes. So relax and enjoy!"*

*We got a surprise at FRG, a great surprise I think you'll agree. We walked down the hall to the room just for kids and there sat two boxes, two boxes with lids. Paint brushes and paint, paper and glue, stickers and glitter and scissors, whoo hoo!*

The Homecoming Box is more than just a craft. It is an experience to remember. You will want to set a stage for the activity by making even the preparations special. It is fun for the kids to see all the tables and supplies laid out and inviting them, but not readily available. During the registration and introduction time, keep the children from touching the items, but let them look. Putting materials where they can see them will cause the children to wonder how they will be using them. This begins the creative process. Anticipation is an emotion not to be missed.

*We sat in a circle. "Crisscross-Applesauce!" The lady said, "Game time!" and opened one box (not the one that was empty and plain by the tools, but the one that was beautifully studded with jewels).*

*... "You'll each get a chance to pull something out. There's a story with each thing I'll tell you about."*

Several pages following in the book describe the game we play first with the children to give them a real feel for the purpose of the Homecoming Box. They can begin to imagine using their own boxes at home.

The box you use for this opening game should be filled with small tokens that evoke a memory. Stories are fibers that weave the fabric of our lives, and these tokens keep

those stories alive and ready to share. Think about your early childhood. Often you cannot distinguish between the story of an event and the actual memory of the event. (for example: If, at age 2, I ran screaming away at the sight a sweet downy Easter duckling, chances are I remember it because the story was repeated every Easter, rather than remembering the actual trauma caused by that soft little ducky!) Children love small things, and they really love stories, so try and have enough tokens to let every child pull one from the box. The stories should be simple. In our box we have many assorted stories, some are used in this book and others are not. (see our list of possible suggestions at the end of this guide. )

The next few pages teach the children how to use the box.

*Think on this box, it's got to be yours; do you like to read books? Do you like the outdoors? Mine will be pink, there's never a doubt. Army and camo are what he's about.*

The sister acknowledges what is important to her in contrast to what is important to her brother. Encourage children to make the design of the box an expression of their own individuality or family. We like to give them time to look at the materials a bit and then with a paper and pencil, retreat to a corner by themselves to sketch some ideas for decorating their boxes. This way, without the influence of peer pressure, they get to think through what is important to *them*, what *they* like, and what *their* passion may be. Emphasize the importance of *The Homecoming Box* being special and unique to each child and to their family. You can learn a lot about your own child by asking questions about their choices of color, design, pictures, etc. used to decorate their box. You will also learn things about how they see the world by what they choose to put into the boxes as tokens.

*We worked on our boxes; we talked and we laughed. We were sticky with glue from this Homecoming craft. Decorating our boxes we thought of the treasures we'd put in them later (and take careful measures). You just can't save an egg from the hens on the farm or it will get rotten and lose all its' charm!*

Working on the boxes should be a relaxed and enjoyable time of careful industry. We often find that busy hands in this focused project give Military kids a natural environment to express experiences and feelings associated with their unique lives; how deployment, waiting and anticipating reunion are affecting them. This is a good time to practice around-the-table storytelling. (Listening, not interrupting, etc.)

To get the most benefit out of this time it is important to keep a measure of control in the room. Too much noise and chaos keeps any conversation from happening, too tight a

clamp on behavior and talking also keeps conversation from happening. Some kids are too shy to want to speak when everyone can hear, but no one should have to shout to be heard, either. Be protective of the working environment.

Take advantage of natural openings to encourage the children. Let them know how much Americans value the important jobs their parents are doing protecting our nation. Reinforce pride in the work they are doing as well: helping out at home, working hard at school, being kind to neighbors and friends, especially those going through the same thing.

During this time, reinforce the purpose of the box and how to use it. Ask about things they might want to put in it. (Note: there is a tendency for kids to want to put in presents for their parent; remind them this box is not for presents, it is for stories.) Also talk about things that should not go in the box: perishables, live animals, etc.

Humor is a good means of teaching and maintaining control. Talk to the children, but more importantly, listen.

*Tonight Brother's sad; he misses our dad "I want Daddy to read! So mom gets his sketch pad. Draw a picture of Pooch from your favorite book; stick it in your box then when Dad takes a look, you'll remember you want him to read it to you. He'll be home sometime soon and that's what he'll do.*

Sadness is a given when waiting gets long. Our first book, *We Serve Too!—A Child's Deployment Book* gives lots of openings to discuss the issues of separation in more depth. The *Homecoming Box* can give a child something tangible to do with it this sadness. There is great satisfaction that comes from making something to put in *The Homecoming Box*. It allows them a time to be present in the sadness and yet work constructively to move past it, looking forward to that day when it can be read by that special person. This little bit of control in a situation where he has absolutely no control, can be very helpful.

Be aware, in grief a child may refuse to do this. That is OK. In that event, you may want to make the note for the box saying something like, "You feel sad now; I understand. I'll put this note in your box so we do not forget this story (or activity, event or movie) is one you want to share with dad (or mom)". A *Tear Bottle* may be of help during these sad times. (See *Tear Bottle* article at the end of this piece for "how-to".)

*Time quickly passed and the day did arrive; and Daddy came home! We all did survive! Our boxes were full and at each suppertime a story was pulled from them one at a time. Tonight Daddy pondered my tiny giraffe. It came from the zoo and we started to laugh. That giraffe licked my shirt after licking the dirt and he scared me so much that I dropped my dessert!*

Reunions are wonderful, but not always easy. *The second book in the We Serve Too!™ We Serve Too!™—A Child's Reunion Book* deals with this very issue and offers many openings to discuss the unique difficulties associated with knitting the family back together following deployment.)

Setting a special time to tell stories from *The Homecoming Box* are very important. (This is very difficult in our day and age, but nonetheless, very important). Choose dinnertime, bedtime or another together-time to share one story a day. Limiting the stories to one per child per day keeps children and adults from being overwhelmed, keeps *The Homecoming Box* time special and creates that anticipation of the next day, too. Kids tend to want to share all at once, but you won't be sorry if you exercise discipline and truly make it a daily family activity. Don't give up if you miss a night here or there, or if the box gets set aside for awhile in the course of life; just pick it when you can, and keep telling stories!

*Sometimes we would laugh; sometimes we would cry. Sometimes we'd forgotten "what's this little guy?" And we'd try and we'd think and we'd think and we'd try; sometimes we'd remember...sometimes we'd just sigh.*

After a year of placing tokens in the box and saving stories, you are bound to have a couple that escape your memory! Try and make sure the things in the box commemorate something important or memorable for the most part, but if your child feels the need to place a common rock they found, or a flower that shrivels up in the bottom of the box (you could suggest a photograph of the flower, or a drawing and maybe a little note about where the rock was found...but sometimes you will not convince them) just go ahead and put it in there. Maybe the parent who was gone could try and help with silly suggestions like, "Was this part of your salad"? Or "Did you find that rock at Mt. Rushmore?" Laughing together is more important than the token in the box!

*But no matter, we each loved our Homecoming Box. As Daddy would say "Homecoming Box rocks"!*

For the parent who has been away, listening to these stories may be wonderful or maybe you find them a little tedious and boring; after all, the things a child see as important may seem trivial and small *and boring* to adults. Try and remember that your reaction to these treasures is deeper than the tokens. Your child has collected these with you in mind. The box is a way to help both you and your child reconnect if you will give the time and undivided attention to these little acts of love inside the box. It is a great opportunity to know your child better, and your reaction could quite possibly be one of the best stories associated with the memory. Sacrificing a little of your own time and attention for your kids will yield great rewards. Be sure your child knows you value the time they put into the box and how special it is to be remembered all year.

*I feel caught up now, he said with a tear, you've made feel like I've always been here! Homecoming Boxes are just really cool! Though our boxes are empty, our hearts are chocked full.*

Homecoming Boxes are unique to the child and the family using them. You may need adjust the ideas, add or subtract to make the boxes even more useful and meaningful for your family. We hope you find *The Homecoming Box* to be a valuable tool to keep your family close. Our thanks go out to each of you serving in your own way.

## Making and Using a *Tear Bottle*

- **Find a jar, bottle or vase to use as a tear bottle.** (Our demonstration bottle is a small clear glass vase with a "lid" made of a 3-inch "diamond" we found at a hobby store.)
- **Find something to represent tears**
  - Florists have clear glass drops
  - Sea glass would work
  - We found some plastic diamonds (used for decorating tables for wedding receptions) to be our representation of tears.
- **Find something small on which to write the tear-bringing tale:**
  - Cut strips of vellum
  - White ribbon
  - Sparkly paper, etc.
  - If your token from the box fits, you can use that too.
- **How to use the *Tear Bottle***
  - Take one "tear", write or draw a representation of the event that brought the tears to the surface on your special strip of paper or ribbon. Drop the tear and the description into the bottle. These events are not put back into the *Homecoming Box*, but find resolution in the *Tear Bottle*. (That way you can revisit *The Homecoming Box* anytime and enjoy it!.)
  - When a story arises out of *The Homecoming Box* that brings or has brought tears, this is the place to put them.
- **First Aid for Heart Hurts—Addressing hurts in their proper proportion**

Much like physical wounds, emotional wounds require different types of treatments in order have a chance to heal properly. Take time to identify the type and seriousness of the wound.

  - For **superficial** bumps and scrapes—***Shake it off***

These are the little everyday insults and offenses that only get worse with attention. Teach your children to get up, brush them off and resume a happy life. These things do not warrant *Tear Bottle* status.
  - For **deep** puncture wounds—***Let it / Make it bleed***

Some wounds are very deep, but hardly show on the surface. These are very dangerous, since they are prone to harbor bacteria and grow into a raging infection. When an event (such as a death of a loved one, a long-held dream, moving away, etc.) brings sadness for a child, it is important to grieve those losses well.

The *Tear Bottle* is a useful tool to give proper acknowledgement to the loss by writing about it, creating a picture or a memorial of sorts and ceremoniously placing a tear with a label of the event in the *Tear Bottle*.

*(It may need to go in the Homecoming Box first to share again later let the family visit this sadness together upon reunion.)*

- For **slashing**, bleeding cuts—**Apply pressure**  
Sometimes “sticks and stones...and words” can really hurt. Wash the wound with tears, and apply pressure to stop the bleeding. Pressure comes in the form of hugs and gathering in as a family. It is that safe place where the bleeding stops and the healing begins. A child may ask for a *Tear* to place the box to help them move on. Use your parental judgment to evaluate the gravity of this wound. This is a good exercise for both parent and child to help learn the art of “genuine” happy living—grieve well and move on. Some things take a lot of grieving and some simply do not.

- **The inspiration for the *Tear Bottle***

- Psalm 56: 8 *"You, O Lord, keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in Your bottle."*
- If faith is a part of your family life, or you would like it to be, you may want to open to this passage and read it out loud at the time when you put the tears away in the *Tear Bottle*. You may also find prayer a welcome comfort at “tear time”.

## Conclusion

- Use *The Homecoming Box* to collect tokens of memories, both happy and sad, for the deployed parent when he returns.
- Use *The Tear Bottle* when a tearful memory comes that you don't want to forget it, but don't necessarily want to be reminded of it over and over.
- When, over the course of many dinnertimes, memory stories of deployment have all come out of the box, all but the tearful memories can go back in the box as a Family keepsake to freely revisit anytime, like you do with your photo albums.
- Keep *The Tear Bottle*, too, but we recommend *parents* be the ones to decide if and when the tears are revisited. Tears are precious treasures—not for everyday use. Keep them where you'll know they are safe.

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