

KEEPING CHILDREN CONNECTED WITH PARENTS WHO ARE AWAY AT SEA AND KEEPING DEPLOYED PARENTS INVOLVED WITH FAMILY LIFE AT HOME CAN BE A CHALLENGE, ESPECIALLY DURING LONG DEPLOYMENTS. THIS IS WHERE READING FORCE HELPS FAMILIES FEEL CLOSER.

Reading Force is the national shared reading charity for Service and ex-Service families. It encourages families – whether at home together or separated by deployment or training – to share a book, chat about it, and fill a scrapbook with thoughts on the book. The concept is simple, and the resulting bonding precious.

All parents are familiar with children clamming up on the phone or Skype, either because they don't know what to say when put on the spot or because feelings overwhelm them. But when a parent and child(ren) read the same book, they have common ground and something to talk about. This can be a really useful way of moving beyond one-word answers and having a good chat. Plus, if a parent at sea is unable to speak on the phone or FaceTime, they can exchange emails and messages with thoughts about the book or which chapter they're up to.

Nicky Broome has been a Navy wife for 18 years and has three daughters. Her husband Dan has been away from the family home in Plympton for the majority of the last two years on HMS Portland. When Nicky and Dan's oldest daughter, Olivia, spoke to her Dad on the phone she was upset and angry because she missed him, and for a while refused to speak with him at all.

Just before Dan's last deployment, Nicky was given a deployment pack with a Reading Force scrapbook in. She decided to give it a try to see if it helped Olivia to speak to her Dad. It worked! Olivia and Dan both read David Walliams' Mr Stink and then they chatted about it on the phone. Reading the same book and talking about it gave Olivia and her Dad an easy and enjoyable shared topic and broke the pattern of difficult phone calls.

Nicky says: "Reading Force has really helped my children get through this very long deployment. I came across Reading Force myself and from now on I would like to pass on as much information to other parents as I can." All three of Nicky and Dan's daughters have now enjoyed doing Reading Force several times.

Reading Force is for babies, toddlers, and children of all ages, from 0-18, and has two types of scrapbooks for families. The yellow 'Little Ones' scrapbook is for babies and children up to and including age seven. It has lots of white space for drawings, doodles, stickers, collage and photos. The green scrapbook is for children aged seven/eight up to young adult, and has lined areas for notes and writing, as well as blank pages for pictures and drawing. Both scrapbooks have a 'free book' postcard, for families to fill in, post, and receive a book (though you can choose any book for Reading Force).

Nicky saw first-hand improved communication between Olivia and her Dad, but it can also be used to keep in touch with extended family.

Bristol-based Fern Watts has two young children, three year-old Sabrina and baby Rowen. Searching online, she found Reading Force and requested a Little Ones scrapbook and book directly via the website. When her husband was deployed she not only involved him, but with wider family as well throughout the UK.

"We did the scrapbook while Sabrina's Daddy was on HMS Ocean, and we involved grandma, grandad, and Sabrina's cousins in Scotland. We read Freddie and the Fairy via Skype and while we were on holiday with them. We also listened to a CD made by Storybook Waves of Daddy reading this story.

"The best thing was getting everyone involved no matter where they were! Our family is spread out in Bristol, Aberdeen, Manchester and Daddy was on HMS Ocean so doing Reading Force activities made the miles seem less." Having got the bug, Fern's family are now reading another book together and completing another scrapbook.

Both the Broome and Watts families entered their scrapbooks into the bi-annual Reading Force Scrapbook Competition and received a special certificate and the prize of a book. All participating families are welcome to enter the competition, and all scrapbooks are returned to families by registered post.

To find out more and to register to take part and receive your free book and scrapbook, go to: www.readingforce.org.uk

Reading Force has teamed up with Storybook Waves, so children can have a book and scrapbook as well as the CD of their parent reading their favourite story: www.storybookwaves.org



Connecting families over the waves with books and scrapbooks