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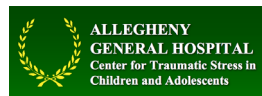
The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network



Traumatic Grief in Military Children

Information for Families

In Partnership with



The Center for
Health and Health Care in Schools

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The Nature of Grief

Introduction to Childhood Grief

Like adults, children and teens may feel intense sadness and loss, or “grief,” when a person close to them dies. And like adults, children and teens express their grief in how they behave, what they think and say, and how they feel emotionally and physically. **Each child and parent grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way or length of time to grieve.**

Some grief reactions cut across children’s developmental levels, and children may show their grief in many different ways. For example, bereaved children or teens of any age may sleep or cry more than usual. They may regress and return to earlier behaviors, or they may develop



new fears or problems in school. They may complain about aches and pains. They may be angry and irritable, or they may become withdrawn and isolate themselves from family and friends.

Bereaved children may also act in uncharacteristic ways that those around them may not recognize as grief reactions.

For example, a quiet toddler may have more tantrums, or an active child may lose interest in things he or she used to do, or a studious teen may engage in risky behavior. Whatever a child’s age, he or she may feel unrealistic guilt about having caused the death. Sometimes bereaved children take on adult responsibilities and worry about their surviving parent and

about who would care for them if they were to lose that parent as well. These worries can be especially acute if the surviving parent is also in the military.

Traumatic Grief in Military Children

The reactions of some children and teens to the death of a parent or someone close to them may be more intense than the common deep sadness and upset of grief. In *childhood traumatic grief*, children develop symptoms associated with *posttraumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). (**Table 1** describes examples of common and traumatic grief reactions at various ages.)

Children of military families may be more likely to experience these more intense reactions if, for example, the death was sudden or traumatic, if it occurred under terrifying circumstances, or if the child witnessed or learned of horrific details surrounding the death. Also, although posttraumatic stress reactions may occur after a deployed parent has been killed in combat,

symptoms can also appear when death comes weeks or months after an initial combat injury, even if the death has been anticipated by the child or adults in the child's life.

Not all children who experience the death of someone special under traumatic circumstances develop traumatic grief.

However, in some cases, children may develop symptoms of PTSD that interfere with their ability to grieve and to call up comforting memories of the person who died. Traumatic grief may also interfere with everyday activities such as being with friends and doing schoolwork. PTSD symptoms in children with traumatic grief can include:

Posttraumatic reactions may interfere with children's ability to grieve and also with their ability to think about comforting memories.

- ◆ **Reliving aspects of the person's death** or having intrusive thoughts, for example, experiencing nightmares about the death, not being able to stop thinking about how the person died, imagining how much the person suffered, or imagining rescuing the person and reversing the outcome.
- ◆ **Avoiding reminders of the death or of the person who died**, for example, by avoiding pictures of the deceased person or news about the military, by not visiting the cemetery, by not wanting to remember or talk about the person, or by feeling emotionally numb.
- ◆ **Increased arousal**, being nervous and jumpy or having trouble sleeping, having poor concentration, being irritable or angry, being "on alert," being easily startled, and developing new fears.

In general, if it becomes apparent that your child or teen is having very upsetting memories, avoiding activities or feelings, or experiencing physical, emotional, or learning problems, he or she may be having a traumatic grief reaction. (See **Table 1.**)

You may wish to seek help or counseling for your child or teen if grief reactions seem to continue without any relief, if they appear for the first time after an initial period of relative calm, if they get worse, or if they interfere with your child's being with friends, going to school, or enjoying activities.

Table 1. Children’s Understanding of Death and Reactions to Grief

Age	Understanding of death	Common grief reactions	Traumatic grief reactions
<p>Preschool and young children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not understand that death is final. May think that they will see the person again or that the person can come back to life. May think it was their fault that the person died. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May become upset when their routines change. May get worried or fussy when apart from their usual caregivers and may be clingy and want extra attention. May express fears, sadness, and confusion by having nightmares or tantrums, being withdrawn, or regressing to earlier behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May repetitively engage in play about the death or the person who died. May have problems getting back on schedule or meeting developmental milestones. May have difficulty being comforted.
<p>School-age children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gradually gain a more mature understanding of death. Begin to realize that death is final and that people do not come back to life. May have scary beliefs about death, like believing in the “boogey man” who comes for the person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May ask lots of questions about how the person died and about what death means. May display distress and sadness in ways that are not always clear, like being irritable and easily angered. May avoid spending time with others. May have physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches). May have trouble sleeping. May have problems at school. May have no reaction at all. May dream of events related to the death or war. May want to call home during the school day. May reject old friends and seek new friends who have experienced a similar loss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May repeatedly talk or play about the death. May have nightmares about the death. May become withdrawn, hide feelings (especially guilt), avoid talking about the person, or about places and/or things related to the death. May avoid reminders of the person (for example, may avoid watching TV news, may refuse to attend the funeral or visit the cemetery). May become jumpy, extra-alert, or nervous. May have difficulty concentrating on homework or class work, or may suffer decline in grades. May worry excessively about their health, their parents’ health, or the health and safety of other people. May act out and become “class clown” or “bully.”
<p>Teens</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a full adult understanding of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have similar grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. May withdraw, become sad, or lose interest in activities. May act out, have trouble in school, or engage in risky behavior. May feel guilt and shame related to the death. May worry about the future. May hide their true feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May have similar traumatic grief reactions to those of school-age children when at home, with friends, and at school. May avoid interpersonal and social situations such as dating. May use drugs or alcohol to deal with negative feelings related to the death. May talk of wanting to harm themselves and express thoughts of revenge or worries about the future. May have low self-esteem because they feel that their family is now “different” or because they feel different from their peers.

Grief in Military Families

Since 2001, thousands of military children have had parents killed in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many other children have had siblings, cousins, and other relatives die in war. Children who lose military family members during wartime are similar to other grieving children in many ways. Like other American children, they come from families of varying diversity and configuration. However, those who care for or work with grieving military children should be aware of certain unique aspects of military family loss.

For one thing, many military service parents may have been deployed for extended periods of time before dying. Because of this, children who may already have been dealing with their parent's physical absence for some time may not experience any immediate changes in their day-to-day life when they learn of the death. **Their past experience with the person's absence may make it hard for some children to accept the permanence of their loss or to take part in their family's grieving.**

Also, military deaths during wartime are part of public events, which diminishes the privacy that families usually have when grieving. This lack of privacy can make it more difficult for family members and other caring adults to protect children from unexpected or unwanted intrusions into family mourning. A family may prefer that the death be kept private. In such circumstances, communities need to be mindful and respectful of the bereaved family's wishes.

However, even well-meaning individuals can encroach on desired privacy. Media can be particularly intrusive and sometimes even aggressive, for example, when they arrive unexpectedly at homes or funeral services where bereaved children are present. Responsible family members should be encouraged to set limits on intruders or well-intentioned individuals to protect children's interests.

Given the political nature of war and the public nature of military deaths, military children may feel confused by how the death is reported or framed within their families, in their school, or in their community. A child who overhears conversation that a parent died "needlessly" in an "unnecessary" war may find it much harder to accept and integrate that death than a child whose parent's death is considered "noble" or "heroic." Also, older teenagers may have their own opinions and feelings about the war, and these may either ease or complicate their grief over the loss of their loved one.

Military deaths may be experienced differently by families and communities depending upon how they are perceived. Many military children lose loved ones to combat, and in some cases, the body may be disfigured, for example, if death was caused by an improvised explosive device (IED). Many other deaths occur as the result of accidents, risk-related behaviors, medical illnesses, or suicide. Any of these circumstances can further complicate children's reactions and affect their ability to integrate their loss.

From the arrival of the uniformed death notification team through funerary military honors, military traditions and rituals surround the death of fallen service members. Because family participation is voluntary, family members can decide to what degree military ritual will be incorporated into the family's mourning process. Many children and families find these military ceremonies comforting.

However, even when families elect military funeral services, younger children may be confused or frightened by the events, and they should be prepared for what will happen. For example, they should be told in age-appropriate terms where the body will be (for example, in a casket) and how people will react (for example, "People will be in uniform and some will be crying"), and what they may do (for example, "Your aunt will be there to keep you company and play with you if you get tired of sitting").

Bereaved families who live on military installations will likely be surrounded by community support and interest. Families typically appreciate this interest and support, but they should also feel free to choose what is most helpful for them. However, the combination of sadness



and fear brought about by a death can be challenging for bereaved military children when they are with other military classmates who are not bereaved.

Also, Reserve and National Guard families, or others who live outside military communities, may find that their unique grief is less well understood by others around them, and children who attend schools with few other military children may find themselves isolated in their experiences of loss. They may feel that others do not fully understand what they are going through.

After a parent dies, military children often experience additional stresses that further magnify the effects of their loss. For example, they may have to move from the military installation where they have lived to a new community where those around them are unaware of their military identity or of the nature of their family member's death. In such circumstances, military children may find themselves suddenly no longer "military" in that they lose that identity in addition to leaving behind their friends and familiar activities, schools, or child-care providers. Once in their new community, children and families must also decide what they want to share with others about the person and about their military-related experience.

Helping Your Child

- ◆ **Provide a sense of security.** After a death, your child might cling to you more, have trouble separating, or be extra-fearful of losing you too. When separating, reassure your child in concrete ways about when you will return. For example, you might say, “I will pick you up right after your lunch.” Keep up with routines and activities that are predictable, familiar, comforting, and reassuring as much as possible. This helps children feel safer and more secure at a time when everything may feel different and unsettled. Be mindful that because children often react to stressful situations through their behavior rather than with words, discipline may need to be flexible. Rather than just punishing problem behaviors, it is important to explore the reasons for the behaviors and to understand that they may be related to grief.
- ◆ **Be patient.** This may be hard to do! Your child’s grief may make his or her behavior and needs more challenging, especially when you are managing your own grief at the same time. Remember that everyone is adjusting to lots of changes in the household and daily life, so there may be ups and downs as time moves on. Your child may need more frequent praise and positive reinforcement. Give extra hugs and comfort.
- ◆ **Pay attention to what your child is communicating through his or her words and behaviors.** While some children will be able to verbalize what they are experiencing, others (especially very young ones) might not know what they are feeling or how to express it in words. Be open to your child’s reactions and questions. Listen to what your child is telling you in words, but also note changes in behavior or physical complaints.
- ◆ **Encourage expression of feelings.** Drawing, writing, playing, acting, and talking can all help your child to get his or his feelings out. Help your child identify the thoughts and feelings that go with his or her behavior.
- ◆ **Know that it can be challenging to separate grief reactions from other feelings and behaviors.** Children have their own styles and personalities and therefore have individualized ways of grieving. For example, some may hide their feelings while others may be prone to fighting. In addition, as life continues, children are faced with other life stresses such as not getting picked for a team or worrying about tests. In general, if your child’s reactions or behavior become more intense or continue over time, consider seeking outside guidance to help sort out grief reactions from other parenting and child difficulties.
- ◆ **Watch out for reminders.** Keep an eye out for military-related reminders that may be difficult for your child. A child who gets overly upset or angry when seeing another person in uniform or when hearing about a war may need additional support or professional help to learn how to cope with painful events or images.

- ◆ **Support your child in maintaining a connection to the person who died.** Sharing stories, photos, and memories can help your child keep the person who died an ongoing part of his or her life and identity. As you share memories, follow and respect your child's lead. If he or she does not seem interested in talking or hearing about the person who died, don't push it. Try again another time. If your child seems continually and/or intensely distressed when talking about the person who died, or seems indifferent or "shut down," consider talking to a professional for guidance.
- ◆ **Provide explanations.** Even the youngest child needs an explanation of what has happened. Use simple language and follow your child's cue as to how much information to offer at any given time. Be prepared to repeat the information. If your child is very young, it might take many years and many conversations for him or her to fully understand that the person who died is not coming back, and that this is not the child's fault.
- ◆ **Keep other important adults informed of what your child is experiencing.** Partner with child-care and preschool providers, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, and other adults to support your child by helping them to understand the connection between grief and your child's feelings and behaviors.
- ◆ **Be an advocate for your child at school.** Discuss the impact of the death on the child with important school staff. Caregivers and teachers should work together to come up with an age-appropriate plan to help students who feel upset during the day or who worry about caregivers' safety when apart. Be aware if the school tries to diagnose your child with learning, emotional, and/or attention disabilities instead of recognizing the effects of grief. You may need to talk with school personnel about adjusting their expectations about schoolwork. You can refer school personnel to another fact sheet, *Traumatic Grief in Military Children: Information for School Personnel*.
- ◆ **Promote involvement.** Participation in a project or organization that helps others will allow your child to feel needed and connected. Doing something as a family to honor the deceased's interests affirms life and can help counteract feelings of helplessness.
- ◆ **Form peer support groups or play groups.** Children want to feel normal and to know that they are not alone. Forming bonds with other children who are dealing and coping with similar situations can be extremely beneficial. There are often support groups around military bases as well as Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Seminars and Good Grief Camps held regionally across the country. These are a perfect place to meet others.
- ◆ **If you have more than one child, be sure to spend one-on-one time with each child in the family so no one feels left out and everyone feels special.** This can be something as simple as going to the park or baking together.



- ◆ **Be sensitive to the changes in your child's life related to the death.** Military deaths are associated with many other changes that can impact your child's grieving process. For example, if your family must now move from a military base to a civilian home, or if your child changes schools, it's important to help the child with his or her goodbyes and to plan for the transition. Arranging and encouraging visits with old friends, as well as working with a new community to get the child involved in activities and groups, are important aspects of adjusting to the death.
- ◆ **Be mindful of the interaction of grief and other issues.** A child's and family's individual situation should be considered. For example, if a child had prior mental health problems or if the parents were divorced, the child may be experiencing additional feelings or encountering new living situations that need attention. Future relationships with extended family members of the person who died should also be handled with sensitivity to minimize additional loss for the child.
- ◆ **Consider the differing needs of children who are bereaved at different ages.** Children who were infants, toddlers, or even preschoolers at the time of death will experience the death differently than older children will. In particular, very young children will not have the same depth of a relationship as an older child or spouse and will not have a store of memories to draw upon. Surviving parents can help by telling stories and providing details in words and pictures to help establish the person's presence and give the child a sense of history. As your young child gets older, he or she may ask specific questions to help gather more memories.
- ◆ **Help your child over time.** As time goes by and your child becomes older, new situations will stir up grief reactions. For example, an older child who seemed to have been in good spirits may become upset when he or she realizes that the person who died will not be there to attend an important event such as a sports competition or prom. Such reactions are normal and to be expected. Be prepared to revisit the loss with your child, and seek professional support as needed.

Taking Care of Yourself

- ◆ **Get enough sleep, exercise, and time for yourself.** You may believe that caring for your children is the only thing that matters now, but in order to do this, you have to also take care of yourself. Modeling self-care is one of the most important things you can do for your children. It assures them that you intend to stay healthy for a long time to come.
- ◆ **Keep caring, familiar, and important adults around.** They can provide support for you and your children. Grandparents, relatives, special friends, and neighbors can help provide caring stability and age-appropriate "fun" that your child may be craving.

- ◆ **Model healthy coping.** Children often take their cues about how to react from the important adults around them and use adults as models for their own feelings and behaviors. If you are sad or upset in front of your child, that's okay. Explain that grownups feel sad too. Show your child through words and actions that, even when you're upset, you are still able to manage your feelings and to take care of him or her. For example, you might say to your two-year-old, "I'm crying right now because I miss Daddy so much and I'm feeling a little sad. How about we just sit down and play with your blocks for a while? I love spending time with you."
- ◆ **Seek professional support.** Parents and caregivers sometimes feel as though they should handle everything on their own. Experiencing the death of a loved one can be extraordinarily painful—even overwhelming—and doesn't necessarily get better on its own. It makes sense to seek the advice, guidance, and support of people who know about grief and can answer your questions about what you may be experiencing so you can support your child in what he or she is experiencing. If you do seek counseling, you may want to talk with different clinicians until you find a good fit. (See **Table 2** for support groups and organizations.)

Table 2. Support Groups and Organizations

Name	Contact Information
Army Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR)	http://www.armymwr.com
Local Veterans Centers	http://www.vetcenter.va.gov 800-827-1000 (for benefits issues)
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Veterans Hotline	http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/Default.aspx 800-273-8255 (273-TALK) (Veterans press “1”)
Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)	http://www.militarychild.org 254-953-1923
Military OneSource	http://www.militaryonesource.com 800-342-9647
National Association of Home Care and Hospice (NAHC)	http://www.nahc.org/ 202-547-7424
National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)	http://www.nctsn.org
National Military Family Association (NMFA)	http://www.nmfa.org 800-260-0218
The Centering Corporation	http://www.centering.org 866-218-0101
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)	http://www.taps.org/youth/ 800-959-8277 (959-TAPS) (24-hour hotline)
Tricare: Your Military Health Plan	http://www.tricare.osd.mil
ZERO TO THREE (Military Families)	http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_military 202-638-0851

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This Guide offers a very basic overview of how children may be affected by the death of a loved one. Assistance and information are also often available through military installations and/or local chaplains, spiritual organizations, school counselors, pediatricians, and local mental health professionals. There are many additional resources, including publications, organizations, programs, and services, that can further assist you in understanding and working through the grief that you and your child may be experiencing.

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

Photos courtesy of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS).