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Helping Bereaved Military Children

By: Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.; Judith A. Cohen, M.D.; and Stephen J. Cozza, M.D.

The joy of family reunion after a military deployment is often more than children or parents even hoped for. However, for some children the reunion never comes. Sadly, some children must cope with the death of a parent. There are often no words to console a child or explain what happened. But surviving family members, adults, and a caring community can help **grieving military children**. Below are some suggestions to help ease children's pain and support their resilience after a death.



The widow and daughter of U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Anthony L. Capra attend a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. Capra, who was an explosive ordnance technician, was killed in an improvised explosive attack in Golden Hills, Iraq, in April 2008. (DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley/Released)

- **Be honest and open**
All children need information appropriate to their age. Use clear language that includes the term "death" rather than euphemisms (e.g. "loss", "gone to sleep") that may confuse children. Follow the child's lead and need for explanations of what happened. Rather than having just one conversation, stay open to ongoing questions and discussions.
- **Provide a sense of safety and security**
Re-establishing routines and structure go a long way towards providing children a comforting sense of stability in the midst of changes. This can be done in the simplest of ways, for example, keeping up with ongoing after-school activities and regular bedtimes.
- **Be a good detective**
Pay attention to how and what your child is communicating. Children often show their feelings and thoughts by their behaviors. Take a step back, ask the right questions, listen and validate their feelings.
- **Support expression of feelings**
Drawing, writing, playing, or reading books about grief can help children learn about and express feelings. Let them know all feelings are acceptable, and help children find healthy ways to channel them.
- **Be a good role model**
Children look to caregivers for examples of how to react and cope. It's okay for grownups to show their emotions, as long as they are not out of control or frightening to children. Adult expressions of sadness can model healthy ways of dealing with difficult feelings. For example, you can say: "I'm crying because I feel sad your dad is missing your soccer game; it's okay for you to cry when you miss him too."
- **Help children learn about the person and stay connected**
Sharing stories, photos, and memories helps keep the person alive in the child's heart and keeps the person a part of the child's identity. For example, you can say: "Even though dad died, we can still remember how much fun we had together on our beach vacations."
- **Keep perspective about non-grief related areas**
Remember that children are still moving forward in their lives. Be aware of other developmental milestones and issues your children are facing at different ages, such as peer pressure or worry over school work, which may or may not relate to the person who died. Grief may make some of these times more difficult, for example, a teen not having his dad to teach him to drive.
- **Partner with other trusted adults in your child's world**
Educate others about your child's grief and collaborate with them to support your child. For example, give and get feedback from teachers and coaches.
- **Look for peer support**
Children and caregivers can benefit from being with others who "know what it's like." Some can benefit from groups that mix military and non-military families, others prefer military specific groups such as those found on a base or offered by **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)**, which holds **Survivor Seminars and Good Grief Camps** regionally across the country.

- **Take care of yourself**
The better and stronger you are, the better caregiver you will be to your children. This includes taking care of your physical health (e.g., eating, sleeping, exercising, relaxing, etc). This can also decrease children's worry about the people they depend on. Take care of your emotional health as well by managing stress and connecting to supportive friends and family who can help you.
- **Be alert to children who may be having difficulty**
Some children may have a traumatic reaction. Some signs that children need more help include their being bothered by upsetting and recurring thoughts or images of the deceased person or the death, avoidance of military related reminders or talk about the person who died, and unusual irritability or jumpiness. If you notice these behaviors in your child consider seeking professional help.
- **Seek professional support**
Caregivers and children may believe they should be able to handle their grief on their own or that they are weak if they need help, and neither is true.

Important communities to reach out for assistance include:

- school
- community
- medical
- mental health
- faith based resources when needed

Grief is a new experience for many people. With any new experience, you can help to learn more about it, get answers to questions, and develop strategies to help you and your child get through it.

For more information, click on the hyperlinks below:

- [family members](#)
- [teachers](#)
- [medical providers](#)

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