



Tips for Military Families: Helping Your Children Adjust to a Parent with Combat-related Trauma

Children of military families face many challenges when a parent has been deployed due to a military conflict. In addition to the usual concerns and fears children experience when a parent is not present in the home, children of a military parent may also have to make adjustments when that parent returns home.

If their parent has experienced combat-related trauma, children may need to learn a new way to relate to a mom or dad who is struggling with his or her own needs, including possible mental health issues. As parents, you cannot always protect your children from the difficulties of life, but you can help them understand what has happened and give them helpful strategies for coping with the changes.

Understanding trauma

Trauma comes in different sizes and shapes. Some families must deal with the trauma of having a parent who is seriously injured or killed. Others may have to deal with a parent's substance abuse, personality changes, depression, unemployment, or other emotional disorders that happen as a result of the military parent's experiences during deployment. No matter what the trauma is, children need help understanding their struggling parent's behaviors that occur as the result of that trauma.

- 1. Listen.** Children need to be heard. It is important that parents take the time to listen, especially when the child is fearful. Your children may have no concept of the trauma the parent experienced.
- 2. Empathize** with how your children are feeling and validate their fears. Children need to know that their feelings are real. It frightens them if you tell your children that "they are fine" when they know they do not feel fine. Agree with their feelings and take them seriously.
- 3. Talk** to your children about their fears. Once you have listened to your children and told them that their feelings are real and understandable, talk with them about the trauma. Don't ignore or minimize your children's feelings. Be honest with them about what is happening. Younger children need to feel safe, and older children will be developing their own opinions and explanations about what is happening. Even if their feelings are not in agreement with yours, hear and respect them.
- 4. Share** what is being done to help support the struggling parent. For younger children, just sharing with them that you are seeking help from a trusted family physician may be enough to help lessen their anxiety. Older children may need more specific information and may even want to be part of an actual plan of support.

Relief from trauma

Children need to feel as secure as possible. Providing your children with some relief from a parent struggling with trauma can help them feel secure. The relief may be temporary, but it should offer some support and hope. You can't change the facts, but you can explain them in a way that helps your children manage them. For example, younger children need to hear that their parent loves them even when he or she seems remote or uninterested in them. Preteens and adolescents will need to have strategies to use when their parent is struggling.

1. Give your children extra attention and offer more physical closeness.

Supporting your children with actions rather than words may be the best relief you can give. Hugging, touching, spending extra time – all of these are simple yet meaningful ways to offer support.

2. Stick to routines.

Do not cancel an outing or event because the struggling parent is not able to attend. Changing normal routines is disruptive and can contribute to more worries. Let your children know that there will be another time to include the other parent and stick to your original plans.

3. Check in with your children regularly.

It is easy to get caught up in the work it takes to manage everyday family life and work. Add to that the needs of a parent with combat-related trauma, and you may feel overwhelmed. If you feel that way, imagine how your children feel! Make a regular time to check in with your children so that they can count on being heard.

4. Allow your children to be angry, but suggest positive ways to cope.

Help younger children create a scrapbook or a picture directory of how they are feeling. Encourage older children to text their parent or include them in other social networks to keep them informed about their everyday life.

5. Honor your children's way of coping.

Most children just want their lives to be normal. Each child processes information differently, and your children will learn to adjust in their own way and on their own timeline. Don't be anxious about how long a child is taking to adjust or to get over feeling angry or bad. On the other hand, don't encourage the child to stay "stuck" in an emotion. Everyone has a unique temperament, tolerance level, and coping strategy. Your job as the parent or caregiver is to help that child cope where they are, and offer alternatives to promote a healthy response to the struggling parent.

While most families are able to manage the day-to-day challenges of living with a military veteran who is struggling with trauma, there might be times when the stress seems too much to handle. During those times, the family can access support through other family members, friends, and professionals. Asking for help is never wrong. Remind yourself that the behavior of the traumatized parent is not about you, and that sometimes all you can do is find a way to manage your response to that behavior.

Military Resources

National Military Family Association – An advocacy organization for the needs of military families.

www.militaryfamily.org

Military OneSource (1-800-342-9647) – Offers help with a wide variety of concerns for the military family (parenting and child care, education, relocation, financial and legal concerns, and other issues).

www.militaryonesource.mil

National Guard – Information and resources for families of National Guard members and Reservists.

www.nationalguard.mil

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Provides a veterans homepage.

www.samhsa.gov

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – A resource for returning service members struggling with reintegration.

www.mentalhealth.va.gov/returningservicevets.asp

The Yellow Ribbon Program (National Guard) – A site that promotes the well-being of National Guard and Reserve members. www.yellowribbon.mil/yrrp

Nonmilitary Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) Youth Resources – Resources for youth on mental health disorders and how to get help. www.yellowribbon.mil/yrrp

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) – A grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. www.namihelps.org

PACER Center’s Project for Parents of Children with Mental Health, Emotional or Behavioral Disorders

A parent training and information (PTI) center in Minnesota for information, advocacy, and support for families of children and youth with disabilities. www.PACER.org/cmh

Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP) – A federally funded parent training and information center assisting military families who have children with special education or health needs.

wapave.org/programs/specialized-training-military-parents-stomp