



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

CASUALTY ASSISTANCE INFORMATION: *Meeting the Needs of Military Families and Children*

The death of a military parent is a life-changing event that impacts the entire family, the surviving spouse or next of kin (NOK), and any children. The casualty assistance officer (CAO) often meets the military family at the critical crossroads of grief (reaction to the loss of a loved one) and bereavement (working through the grief). While grief and bereavement are normal processes of human experience, they differ in their expression and intensity for each individual, and often reflect a family's unique cultural, ethnic, spiritual and social background.

This fact sheet addresses the needs of military families, especially children, who experience the unthinkable loss of a parent through combat injury or deployment related accidents.

This fact sheet addresses the needs of military families, especially children who experience the unthinkable loss of a parent through combat injury or deployment related accidents. The fact sheet provides general information on children's grief upon learning of their parent's death as well as details about children's understanding of death at different ages. There is also information on warning signs that may indicate a child's need for professional help in coping, as well as recommendations about the involvement of children in funerals, especially military funerals.

Understanding Children's Grief and Bereavement

Children are likely to be powerfully affected by the deaths of loved ones, but may be less able to express confusing thoughts and feelings in words. While many children may express feeling sad, cry or become more withdrawn, others will express their emotions through behaviors that may be regressed, reverting back to earlier behaviors. Infants and toddlers are likely to experience the death through the emotional responses or change in availability of the important adults in their lives. Very young children can demonstrate changes in sleeping or eating patterns or develop tantrums or overactive behavior. School aged children may express emotional concerns through physical complaints such as stomachaches or headaches. Teenagers often wish to present themselves as independent and not in need of adult help. Their sullenness or seeming disconnectedness should not be mistaken for a lack of emotional response to a death. Behavioral changes in any grieving child are better viewed as due to emotional responses rather than disciplinary problems.

Children's Understanding of Death

It is important to appreciate how children of different ages understand and may react to their parent's death. This information can be helpful to you and the next of kin.

Ages 0–3

Children younger than 3 do not understand the concept of death, but toddlers can understand the notion of 'here' and 'not here'. Children of this age are very aware of the emotional reactions of their caretaker and will react to the NOK's level of distress. Children of this age experience anxiety if separated from their caretakers. They do not need verbal explanations, so much as needing to be held by and close to their caretakers and maintaining a normal routine.

Ages 3–7

Children at this stage have limited understanding and need to be told that death is permanent. Simple facts should be explained such as who died, where and how. They understand that the body stops functioning when a person dies, but may need help to fully understand what that means. Examples of ways to explain death include, "Daddy no longer sees, hears, eats, talks or moves." Likening death to the death of a pet can also be helpful. It is unwise to tell children that the deceased is sleeping or resting because the child may interpret this literally causing them to be confused and fearful.

Ages 7–11

At this stage, children need to be told more facts of who

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has died, where, how and when. It is important to use (and continue to use) the word, 'died' to explain what happened and to encourage children to express their feelings. Children at these ages have better understanding of the permanence of death and will react with many questions and may become very emotional. Because children may react in unpredictable ways, it is important to allow their emotional response and accept it without judgment.

Adolescents and Older

Explain the death at the level of an adult. Because adolescents understand abstract concepts like death, they are likely to ask more questions which their caretakers, and those who assist, may not have answers to. It is okay to say, "I don't know" when there is no explanation or if you lack information to answer their questions. Because teenagers seek to express their independence from family and their reliance on peers, it is only natural that they will experience conflict around autonomy and a need for more dependence on their family at this time. It is important to acknowledge the unique developmental needs of adolescents and give them comfort as well as personal space.

Warning Signs

Warning signs that may indicate a child is struggling and may need professional help include:

- Frequent bedwetting
- Physical complaints (nausea, headaches, difficulty sleeping or nightmares)
- Poor eating habits
- Spending more time alone
- Refusal to go to school or leave their caregiver
- Exaggerated feelings, blame, guilt, or aggressive outbursts
- Making comments about hurting themselves or actually hurting themselves (cutting, scratching, biting or accident prone behavior)

Important adults in children's lives such as teachers, coaches, and clergy should know about the family's loss so that they too can attend to and provide support for grieving children.

Children's Involvement in the Funeral

Families must decide to what extent and whether they will incorporate military traditions into their loved one's funeral, and importantly if and how their children should participate. This may be a child's first exposure to a funeral. Military caskets, the firing of weapons, and the folding of flags can all spark curiosity, interest and sometimes confusion and fear as well.

Families typically have routines and traditions that can be helpful in the days leading up to and following a funeral. Children can prepare for funerals, like other important

events, with attention to the details of selecting clothing, polishing shoes, getting personal items together.

While funerals are a time of family pain, they are also a time of family gathering. Contact with other family members and close friends before, during and after the ceremony can be reassuring to children and demonstrate that sadness does not need to be borne alone. Parents and caring adults should help children understand what they are likely to see as people mourn.

Allow children to be children. Their participation and activities during the funeral service may vary depending upon their age. Some young children may appear to be uninvolved or run around and be disruptive. A funeral is not the appropriate time to discipline children.

It is best to allow children to establish their own level of comfort and involvement in funeral services. Gentle adult reassurance can be very helpful. However, it is inadvisable to force children to attend viewings or funeral services when they demonstrate significant discomfort. Parents and other adults should be prepared to reopen discussions about the funeral with children after the funeral service is completed.

Because military deaths during wartime are often of public interest, family privacy around grieving may be diminished. It is important to protect children from disturbing media exposure. Reserve and National Guard families or those living outside of military communities may find that their grief is less well understood by the civilian community.

Self-Care and Buddy Care

Individuals who perform casualty affairs assistance and support experience extreme stress and sadness. The impact of this exposure can be very challenging. It is impossible to predict how a family will react initially and over time. The emotions encountered can range from profound grief, to physical weakness and helplessness, to panic and in some cases extreme anger. Knowing how to engage and support families in order to communicate important information and helpful resources, to ensure family safety, and function — all are difficult tasks. Buddy care and self-care go hand in hand. It is important to have co-workers who can debrief and understand each other's experiences. It is important to maintain a personal routine and schedule involving good eating habits, exercise and social involvement with loved ones. Difficulty sleeping, staying asleep, eating and concentrating are serious signs that may indicate a need for professional assistance to help in coping and sustaining commitment to this work. It is important to acknowledge the challenges of the job but it is also essential to realize its importance and value in the lives of the families touched, on behalf of the fallen soldier, the military community and the nation's security.

