NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Traumatic Grief in Military Children

Information for Educators

In Partnership with

NMFA National Military Family Association

T*A*P*S Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

ALLEGHENY GENERAL HOSPITAL Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents

ZERO TO THREE National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

CSTS Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress Uniformed Services University

This project was funded in part by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

This project was funded in part by a mini-grant from the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCCTS), the coordinating center of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).

The Nature of Grief

Educators and school personnel play important roles in supporting military children who have experienced loss. Although educators cannot, and should not, take on the responsibility of providing therapy to children who are grieving, they can be valuable partners in observing children, creating supportive environments, and knowing when to suggest referral to a mental health professional.

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 They may be angry and irritable, or they may become withdrawn and isolate themselves from family and friends.

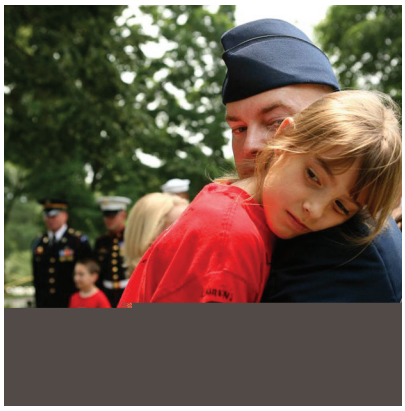
Bereaved children may also act in uncharacteristic ways that those around them may not recognize as grief reactions. For example, a quiet toddler may have more tantrums, an active child may lose interest in things he or she used to do, or a studious teen may engage in risky behavior. Whatever a child's 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

Sometimes, 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 by 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:



- **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 children or teens are having very upsetting memories, avoiding activities or feelings, or experiencing physical, emotional, or learning problems, they may be having a traumatic grief reaction. (See **Table 1**.)

You may wish to suggest that the family seek help or counseling for a 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 the child's being with friends, going to school, or enjoying activities.

- **Encourage expression of feelings** through drawing, writing, playing, acting, and talking. Share any concerns with a school mental health professional.
- **If a child appears to be feeling "overwhelmed"** at school, make sure that he or she is allowed to retreat to a "safe person" (for example, a counselor, a nurse, or the principal), and have a "time-out card" system in place when the student needs a break.
- **Be patient and flexible.** A student's behavior and needs may ebb and flow and may at times become more challenging as the child reacts to his or her loss.
- **Address aggressive or self-destructive behavior** with caring discipline. Do not be punitive, but do set limits to unacceptable behavior. Check in with a school mental health professional to discuss the need for additional help in the classroom or outside.

Helping Staff and School Personnel to Support a Grieving Student

- **While taking into account a bereaved student's right to privacy, administrators should consider informing school staff** who have contact with the child that he or she has suffered a loss and may be experiencing difficulties or changes in school performance as a result. In this way, school staff can work together to ensure that students get the support and understanding they need.
- **Concerns regarding a student can be referred to a school mental health professional** (for example, a school counselor, school social worker, or school psychologist) who can assess the student's needs and challenges and suggest appropriate supports and interventions. The mental health professional can also link the student and family to community resources as needed.
- **Familiarity with military-related issues and resources** can help educators better understand a student's and family's situation. Staff and school personnel are not responsible for providing all the services, but they can be instrumental in helping a family that may feel overwhelmed or not sure how to find out what other help is available.

Coordinating with Family and Caregivers to Support a Grieving Student

- **Build a relationship of trust with the student's family.** Identify a school professional who can serve as liaison between the school and the bereaved child's family. This professional can talk with the family about its ongoing needs and how to meet them. (See **Table 2** for support groups and organizations.)
- **Have the liaison communicate and coordinate** directly with the student's caregivers about behavior and adjustment in the classroom. It is also important that the liaison be aware of how the student is doing outside school (for example, whether he or she is able to do homework) and of major changes in the living situation that may be directly impacting school performance.

- **In collaboration with school staff and the child's caregivers, develop a plan** for handling a student who worries about a surviving caregiver and who wants to call home. Create a plan to ease the student's anxiety and maintain a safe environment. For example, have the child meet with a chosen school staff member to make a call during a nonacademic or free time.

Helping Students to Support a Grieving Classmate

- **It is important to be open to classmates' questions and concerns.** Teachers may not know all the answers and should not feel pressured to have the "right" answer. It is best to consult with school mental health professionals about how to talk with classmates who may ask for details or have other concerns about the death of a student's parent.
- **Explain to classmates that children with traumatic grief may be distracted, irritable, or jumpy,** or may not be interested in playing or joking around. Let students know that it is okay to talk with their classmate if he or she brings up the death, and that they should listen respectfully.
- **Help classmates support a returning bereaved student.** It can be useful to prepare classmates for a student's return by offering suggestions about how to approach their bereaved peer and what they might say, for example, "A simple 'I'm sorry, glad to have you back' can be enough, and so supportive."

Table 2. Support Groups and Organizations

General Mental Health Resources for Educators	Contact Information
American Psychological Association (APA)	http://www.apa.org 800-374-2721
American School Counselor Association (ASCA)	http://www.schoolcounselor.org 800-306-4722
Center for Health and Health Care in Schools School of Public Health and Health Services, George Washington University	http://www.healthinschools.org 202-466-3396
Center for Mental Health in Schools (SMHP) UCLA/School Mental Health Project	http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu 866-846-4843
Center for School Mental Health (CSMH) University of Maryland School of Medicine	http://csmh.umaryland.edu/resources.html/index.html 888-706-0980
Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents Allegheny General Hospital	http://www.pittsburghchildtrauma.org 412-330-4328
Children's Grief and Loss Issues	http://www.childrensgrief.net
Mental Health America	http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net 800-969-6642
National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)	http://www.nasponline.org 866-331-6277 (866-331-NASP)
National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCTSN)	http://www.nctsn.org
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)	http://www.nimh.nih.gov 866-615-6464 (NIMH Information Center)
School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)	http://www.sswaa.org 888-446-5291
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Mental Health Information Center	http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases (Mental Health Services Locator page) 800-789-2647

Military-Related Resources	Contact Information
Army Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR)	http://www.armymwr.com
Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress, Uniform Services University	http://www.csstsonline.org
Centering Corporation	http://www.centering.org 866-218-0101
Local Veterans Centers	http://www.vetcenter.va.gov 800-827-1000 (for benefits issues)
Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC)	http://www.militarychild.org 254-953-1923
Military OneSource	http://www.militaryonesource.com 800-342-9647 (Stateside, CONUS) 877-888-0727 (en Español)
National Association of Home Care and Hospice (NAHC)	http://www.nahc.org/ 202- 547-7424
National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)	http://www.nasponline.org 866-331-6277 (866-331-NASP)
National Military Family Association (NMFA)	http://www.nmfa.org 800-260-0218
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Veterans Hotline	http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/Default.asp 800-273-8255 (800-273-TALK) (Veterans press "1")
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)	http://www.taps.org/youth/ 800-959-8277 (800-959-TAPS) (24-hour hotline)
Tricare: Your Military Health Plan	http://www.tricare.osd.mil http://tricare.mil/mybenefit/
ZERO TO THREE (Military Families)	http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_military 202-638-1141

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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 helping students and their families to understand and work through the grief they may be experiencing.

This project was funded in part by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Suggested Citation:
National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2008). *Traumatic Grief in Military Children: Information for Educators*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

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).