

Helping Military Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Parents

Children grieve in different ways. Military children face unique challenges after the death of a service member. Some may develop traumatic grief responses, making it more difficult to cope. Here are ways to recognize and help your military child with traumatic grief.

I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT:	YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU:
1. Since this can feel the same as long separations during deployment, I may believe my loved one is still alive and coming back.	1. Tell me honestly—and with age-appropriate words—that this is different from other separations. Be patient when I act as if he is coming back. Use words like “death” or “died” rather than words that can confuse me (“passed away” or “we lost him”).
2. The military culture was important to my service member and is familiar to me. Moving, losing my military connections, and getting used to civilian life can be hard and confusing.	2. Help me connect to the military or military children through sponsored events, programs, people in the local military community, or other places.
3. I may isolate myself and feel lonely because I am not with my military friends who “get it” and understand my life.	3. Help me form new friendships. Encourage me (as I feel more comfortable in my new community) to decide for myself how I want to keep my past military identity alive.
4. Some of my past military friends may be great supports. Others military kids with family members who are still serving may not know what to say, how to help me, or may be afraid to stay close to me.	4. Explain why some of my military friends may feel awkward or scared or act differently. They may worry they will have someone die too, or mistakenly think my service member was to blame. Help me cope with my friends’ different reactions.
5. The death of a service member can be very public. It can upset and scare me to see military related images on television or in video games.	5. Monitor the media (TV shows, movies and video games) to limit the upsetting graphic war images I see. Talk to me about what is in the news.
6. My views about the military and politics may change over time. I may blame the military for my service member’s death and be angry when people talk about politics, when I hear about the military in the news, or have other reminders of the military.	6. Talk about politics, the news, and the military in a way that is sensitive to my feelings, and understand that these may be different from yours.
7. If my service member was in the National Guard or Reserve I might feel as if I don’t fit in either the military or civilian world. I might feel like neither military nor civilian kids really understand me.	7. Talk to me to about my military member’s service and teach me to talk to civilians about it. Offer me ways to learn more about the Guard and Reserve and connect with those kids (at TAPS, purple camps, Operation Military Kids).
8. I may not understand military protocol or rituals, including those related to military deaths. Some rituals may remind me of my loved one’s sacrifice and make me feel proud, but others might remind me of the death and upset me.	8. Understand that I may have mixed emotions and may get upset or angry during military ceremonies. Be patient and help me do things to feel calm. Answer questions, and find someone to explain the military service or funeral rituals to me.
9. I really miss my service member. It is confusing to feel really proud and also to feel upset or angry that they died by serving their country.	9. Accept my different feelings and help me find ways to manage my grief, anger, or confusion. Offer ways to honor my loved one’s service and commemorate military related events using rituals (anniversaries, Veteran’s Day, Memorial Day, etc.).
10. Sometimes I may want to know about my service member’s life in the military. Other times I may not want to think about the military at all because it reminds of how he died and it makes me too angry or upset.	10. Keep pictures of the person who died around for me to see. Tell me stories about the person and make me a memory book so I can keep the person in my mind and my heart.

If you have any questions about how your child is doing, find a mental health professional who works with children and contact organizations that work with military families. For more information, go to www.nctsn.org, or www.taps.org