



Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Military Parents or Caregivers



Since 2001, thousands of military children have had parents killed in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many other children have had siblings, cousins, and other relatives die in war. Like civilian children, bereaved military children come from families of varying diversity and configuration. However, after a parent dies, military children often experience additional stresses that further magnify the effects of their loss. For example, they may have to move from the military installation where they have lived to a new community where those around them are unaware of their military identity or of the nature of their family member's death. In such circumstances, military children may find themselves suddenly no longer "military" in that they lose that identity in addition to leaving behind their friends and familiar activities, schools, or child-care providers. Children of deceased Reserve or National Guard parents live among civilians who may not show understanding or support related to the loss of their military identity.

How do children grieve?

Children of all ages grieve after the death of a family member, friend, or other significant person. Grieving children can show a range of emotions and reactions. Sometimes they appear sad and talk about missing the person. Other times they play, interact with friends, and do their usual activities. In addition to intense sadness, children may show changes in behavior (e.g., be less interested in usual activities, be irritable, have changes in sleeping or eating), changes in their social interactions (e.g., be more withdrawn), and/or question their faith. When adjusting to the loss, children typically are able to participate in "tasks" considered helpful to the grieving process:

- Understanding the person cannot come back
- Coping with feelings about the person and the death
- Adjusting to changes in life without the person
- Talking about memories and what that person meant to them
- Committing to relationships with new people
- Continuing on a healthy developmental path

1 What is Childhood Traumatic Grief

In Childhood Traumatic Grief, children have traumatic stress reactions to a death which interfere with their ability to accomplish the tasks of bereavement. When this happens, even happy thoughts and memories of the person remind children of the distressing way the person died. A younger child may be afraid to sleep alone at night due to nightmares about a self-harm related death she witnessed, while an older child may avoid watching his favorite football team that he used to watch with his father because it brings up painful memories about his father's death while deployed. These children get “stuck” on the traumatic aspects of the death and cannot process their grief successfully. When children with Traumatic Grief have scary thoughts, upsetting memories, and negative feelings related to how the person died, they may also have uncomfortable physical symptoms. To control and minimize the unpleasant feelings and reactions, they try to avoid the scary memories; avoid talking or thinking about anything related to the person or way the person died. They may also avoid people, places, or things that trigger upsetting thoughts and feelings. These reactions and the fear of stirring up scary reminders make it difficult to remember positive things or to talk about the person and what the person meant to them.

2 Who develops Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Most children recover and adjust to the death of a family member, friend or other important person. But a smaller number will develop Childhood Traumatic Grief. This can occur following a death from sudden, unexpected combat related causes, suicide, mass shootings, accidents, or a sudden medical condition such as a heart attack. However, children can also develop symptoms even if death was due to natural causes, advanced age, a terminal illness such as cancer, or following a military related illness or injury after being at home—especially if the child was surprised or scared by the death or was exposed to complex or frightening medical procedures. Even well prepared military-connected children who had someone die by putting themselves in harm's way for the safety of others can develop Traumatic Grief.

3 What are the signs a child might have Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Grief related traumatic stress reactions may include the following:

- Intrusive reactions such as upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, memories, or play about the frightening way the person died
- Physical or physiological distress such as headaches, stomachaches, symptoms mimicking the way the deceased died, jumpiness, trouble concentrating
- Avoidance reactions such as withdrawal; acting as if not upset about the death; or avoiding reminders of the person, the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to the death
- Negative mood or beliefs related to the traumatic death such as anger, guilt, shame, self-blame, loss of trust, believing the world is unsafe
- Increased arousal such as irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, dropping grades, increased vigilance, and fears about safety of oneself or others; self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, suicidality)

4 What can you do to help children with Traumatic Grief?

Parents play a key role in helping children or adolescents with Traumatic Grief. The following are some ways to support a child who may have Traumatic Grief:

- Allow opportunities for your child to talk or express thoughts or feelings in creative ways. Listen and ask questions in a non-judgmental manner to understand how they are doing. Encourage open communication with children when they are ready, without forcing them to talk when they don't want to.

- Be aware that you and your family may be used to long absences from your military loved one; this can make it difficult for children to understand the permanence of death.
- Shore up support for your children (and you) if the service member who died was attached to a deployed unit; grief reactions may be significant if the unit returns and your loved one is not a part of the group.
- Recognize that people, places, or events connected with the military can trigger traumatic reactions. For example, media, television, and films depicting war; people in uniform in the community; or loud noises, firearms, or gunshots nearby may cause distress. Don't be surprised to see a child show excessive worry about other military service members.
- Be mindful that military service can be a controversial topic in the media and the community. Your family may interact with people who share negative feelings about war that can be insensitive or hurtful. In addition, military deaths can be high profile and garner media attention that can quickly cause strong reactions. Being aware of potential challenging situations can help you assist your children in feeling loved and protected. If the situation arises, you might find it helpful to select a family spokesperson to intervene with the media or to protect your privacy.
- Bear in mind that you do not need to transition from an active status military family to survivor status by yourself. If you are dependents of a deceased service member, your circle of support may come from active duty families, military pastors, civilian families and friends, spiritual leaders and others. Support is available. You need not walk alone.
- Take care of yourself, model coping strategies for your child, and seek out personal support. Connect with military loss survivors who can help to you in the ongoing process of grieving. You can access Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS.org), the largest peer network of military loss survivors, on a 24/7 basis.
- Keep in mind typical Traumatic Grief signs including troubling reactions that seem to go on too long, reactions that interfere with school work or relationships with friends or family, or concerning reactions such as your child's refusal to respond to your attempts to openly discussing things. If specific trauma reminders such as patriotic holidays, military uniforms, or a return to military base cause a significant distress reaction, your child may need additional help. If you are unsure how your child is doing, please reach out to a professional for guidance.
- Currently two treatment models have scientific evidence of helping children recover from Childhood Traumatic Grief:
 - Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) for children ages 3-18 years and parents or primary caregivers provided in 12-15 individual or group sessions. More information is available at <https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/trauma-focused-cognitive-behavioral-therapy>
 - Trauma Grief Components Therapy for Adolescents (TGCT-A) for teens ages 13-17 years, provided in groups. More information is available at <https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/trauma-and-grief-component-therapy-adolescents>

Where do you find additional information and help?

Further information for children, parents, professionals, pediatricians, and educators is available at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org with materials specific to Traumatic Grief at www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief.

In addition, TAPS provides peer based emotional support and programs for those grieving the loss of a military loved one including a 24/7 National Military Survivor Helpline, connections to grief and trauma resources, casework assistance, and peer based emotional support. TAPS provides specific child related programming (contact <https://www.taps.org/mission>) and has a multitude of additional resources such as the webinar: Grief Support for Military Children (<https://www.taps.org/webinar/2016/april26>).