



Tough Topics Series

Learning and Teaching Support

Issue 1

Supporting Military Kids During Deployment

When military parents are mobilized, their kids are in need of and deserve special support from local schools and communities. During the emotional cycle of deployment, their lives are literally turned upside down! A significant portion of stability in their family system has temporarily been disrupted resulting in increased levels of stress and potential separation anxiety.

As a result, these military kids are in need of heightened understanding and support from professionals in local school buildings where they spend a large portion of their day. To help educators more thoroughly understand their experience, the 5 stages of deployment are described below:

Stages of Deployment

Stage 1:

Pre-Deployment – Begins with the warning order to service member for deployment from home through their actual departure.

- ▶ Anticipation of loss vs. denial
- ▶ Train up and long hours away
- ▶ Getting affairs in order
- ▶ Mental/physical distance
- ▶ Tension builds

Stage 5:

Post-Deployment – Begins with the arrival of the service member back home and typically lasts 3-6 months (or more) after return.

- ▶ Service member re-integrating into family
- ▶ Family “honeymoon” period
- ▶ Independence developed in sustainment stage redefined
- ▶ Need for “own” space
- ▶ Renegotiating routines

Deployment – Period immediately following service member’s departure from home through first month of deployment.

- ▶ Mixed emotions/relief
- ▶ Disoriented/overwhelmed
- ▶ Family numb, sad, alone
- ▶ Sleep difficulties
- ▶ Security and safety issues

Stage 2:

Stage 3:

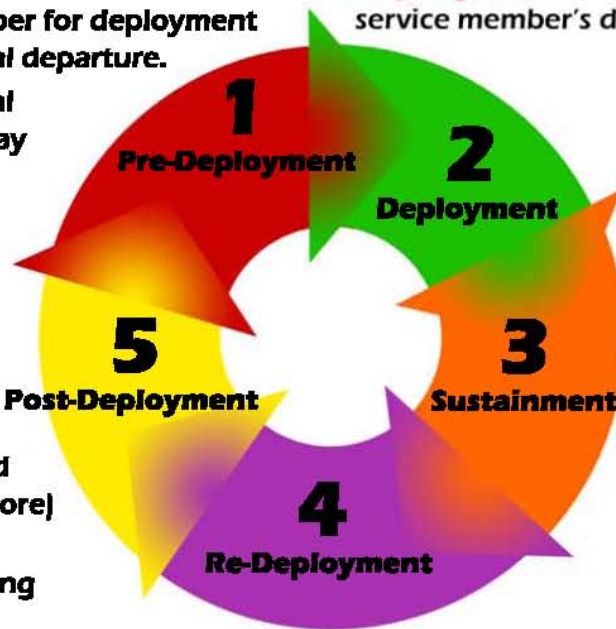
Sustainment – Lasts from first month through the end of deployment.

- ▶ New family routines established
- ▶ New sources of support developed
- ▶ Feel more in control of day to day life
- ▶ Sense of independence
- ▶ Family Confidence–“We can do this”

Stage 4

Re-Deployment – Defined as the month before the service member is scheduled to return home.

- ▶ Anticipation of homecoming
- ▶ Excitement
- ▶ Apprehension
- ▶ Burst of energy/“nesting”
- ▶ Difficulty making decisions



Symptoms of Deployment Related Stress in the Classroom

- ▶ Difficulty concentrating in school
- ▶ Unable to resume normal classroom assignments and activities
- ▶ Continued high levels of emotional response such as crying and intense sadness
- ▶ Appearing depressed, withdrawn and non-communicative
- ▶ Expressing sad or violent feelings in conversation, writings or drawings
- ▶ Intentionally hurting self or at risk for hurting others
- ▶ Gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a short period of time
- ▶ Discontinue taking care of personal appearance
- ▶ Exhibit possible drug or alcohol use/abuse

Teacher Intervention Strategies

Focus on students and the classroom learning environment – Retain routines and emphasis on the importance of learning while always leaving room to tend to student needs.

Provide structure – Maintain predictable schedule with clear behavioral guidelines and consequences. If student is distressed about circumstances of deployment, find appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs and fears.

Maintain objectivity – Respond in a calm and caring manner, answer questions in simple, direct terms. Regardless of political beliefs, refrain from expressing personal opinions.

Reinforce safety and security – After classroom discussions, end with a focus on student safety and the safety measures being taken on behalf of their loved one and others.

Be patient and reduce student workload as needed – Expect temporary slow downs or disruptions in learning when a deployment occurs.

Listen – Be approachable, attentive and sensitive to the unique needs of students coping with deployment and family separations. Take time to acknowledge the deployment and answer student questions in a factual manner.

Be sensitive to language and cultural needs – Be aware of, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to the language, values, and beliefs of other cultures. Inquire about school, community, and military resources available to assist.

Acknowledge and validate feelings – Help students develop a realistic understanding of deployment. Provide reassurance that the feelings of loss, anger, frustration and grief are normal and all individuals adjust at a different pace.

Strengths resulting from deployment

- ▶ Fosters maturity
- ▶ Emotional growth and insight
- ▶ Encourages independence, flexibility, and adapting to change
- ▶ Builds skills for adjusting to separations and losses faced later in life
- ▶ Strengthens family bonds
- ▶ Promotes awareness and understanding of importance of civic duty

<http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/> – <http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org>

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP - Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Information for this article adapted from *The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective* by LTC Simon H. Pincus, US, MC, COL; Robert House, USAR, MC, LTC; Joseph Christenson, USA, MC, and CAPT; Lawrence E. Alder, MC, USNR-R; and Educators Guide to the Military Child During Deployment by Educational Opportunities Directorate of the Department of Defense and the National Traumatic Stress Network



Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

Helping Kids Cope with Stress

While some stress in life is normal and even healthy, kids today seem to be confronted with a myriad of experiences that can create tension and make coping with life a challenge. Common examples of these stressors include: lack of basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter), divorce, death, illness, incarceration, foster care placement, family substance abuse, domestic violence, extended separation from a parent or loved one, or physical, sexual, emotional abuse.



- ▶ At the ordinary end of the spectrum are events which occur to most children in our society and for which there are fairly well-defined coping patterns.
- ▶ A short distance along the spectrum are the stresses which occur when children have only one parent in the home or when they live in multiple-parent, multiple dwelling households.
- ▶ Toward the severe end of the spectrum are stresses caused by extended separation of children from their parents or siblings.
- ▶ At the severe end of the spectrum are those stresses that are long lasting and require kids to make major behavioral, emotional, and/or personality adaptations in order to survive.

Signs of Stress

	Behaviors	Reactions	Communications	Interaction
Infants to 5 years	Fussiness; uncharacteristic crying; neediness; generalized fear; heightened arousal and confusion	Helplessness; passivity; avoidance of stress related reminders; exaggerated startle response; regressive symptoms; somatic symptoms; sleep disturbances; nightmares	Cognitive confusion; difficulty talking about stressors; lack of verbalization; trouble identifying feelings; unable to understand events; anxieties about change/loss	Clinging; separation fears; grief related to abandonment by caregivers
6-11 Years	Spacey; distracted; changes in behavior, moody, personality; regressive behavior; aggressive behavior; angry outbursts	Reminders trigger disturbing feelings; responsibility; guilt; safety concerns; preoccupation; obvious anxiety; general fearfulness; somatic symptoms; sleep disturbances; nightmares	Confusion and inadequate understanding of events; magical explanations to fill in gaps of understanding; withdrawn; quiet	Worry and concern for others; separation anxiety; repetitious traumatic play and retelling of events; loss of ability to concentrate; school avoidance; loss of interest in activities
12-18 Years	Self conscious; sadness; depression; stress driven risk-taking and acting out; recklessness; substance use/abuse	Efforts to distance from feelings; wish for revenge and action-oriented responses; life threatening re-enactment; decline in school performance; sleep and eating disturbances	Increased self-focus; social withdrawal; avoidance	Flight into driven activity/involvement with others OR retreat in order to manage inner turmoil; rebellion at home and school; abrupt shift in relationships

Age Specific Strategies to Help Kids Cope with Stress

Infant to 2 ½ Years

Maintain calm atmosphere; keep familiar routines; avoid unnecessary separations; minimize exposure to reminders of stress; expect temporary behavior regression; help give simple names to big feelings; talk briefly and openly about stressful event; provide soothing activities.

2 ½ to 5 Years

Maintain familiar routines; do not introduce new and challenging experiences; avoid nonessential separations; tolerate retelling of stressful events; help name strong feelings during brief conversations; respect fears; expect regressive behavior; protect from re-exposure to stressful events; provide opportunities and props for play; if nightmares, explain they aren't real to help subside.

6-11 Years

Listen and tolerate re-telling of events; respect fears; give time to cope; increase awareness and monitor play; set and enforce limits; permit to try new ideas to deal with fears and feel safe; reassure that all feelings are normal after stressful events.

12-18 Years

Encourage discussions with peers and trusted adults; reassure that strong feelings (guilt, shame, embarrassment, desire for revenge) are normal; provide healthy outlets for emotions; encourage spending time with supportive friends/peers; help find activities that offer opportunities to experience mastery, control, and self-esteem.

Tips for Educators

Educators are often faced with the challenge of supporting kids who are coping with stressful life circumstances. The guidance provided by an educator can make the difference in whether or not kids feel completely overwhelmed by their stressors or are able to develop healthy emotional behavioral and psychological coping skills. The following are helpful strategies to assist educators in supporting kids coping with stress:

Be a role model – Set an example and keep in mind that kids learn from watching the adults in their lives.

Connect with kids – Pay attention to their fears; respect their wish to not talk until ready; help them keep stressors in perspective.

Foster open communication – Speak in terms that are easy to understand; reassure and provide opportunities for them to express their thoughts and concerns in safe ways; answer questions as openly and honestly as possible.

Maintain consistency – Expect and respond to changes in behavior; maintain consistent academic and behavioral expectations.

Foster resilience – Help kids interpret what has happened and make sense of it; help them explore positive ways of coping with fears and anxieties.

Be alert to special needs – Spend extra time with kids if necessary; make referral to school or community counseling for additional support if needed.

Open lines of communication with parents and caregivers – Coordinate information between school and home; provide parents with helpful suggestions and information about available school and community resources.

For more information: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>



Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

Impact of Grief and Loss

Educators and other helping professionals often find themselves in the critical position of supporting kids struggling with significant life changes, personal losses or the death of a parent/loved one. The grief resulting from these experiences can be defined as “the internal anguish bereaved persons feel in reaction to a loss they have experienced.” It’s important to remember that kids grieve, too, and they may or may not “show it” outwardly to the rest of the world. What is most important is that we understand their varied responses and provide quality support to guide them through the process toward a healthy resolution.

Understanding the Grief and Loss Process



General youth reactions . . .

- ▶ Tend to go in and out of grief process
- ▶ Developmental stage will influence their reactions
- ▶ All cannot talk openly about their loss and feelings
- ▶ May not seem to be affected at all – external vs. internal responses or “survival mode”
- ▶ Play is one way kids make sense of changes in their world
- ▶ Not unusual for them to experience physical reactions
- ▶ Need to grieve significant loss/change/death at all developmental stages for healthy resolution

Responses of Grieving Child/Youth

Academic

- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Failing or declining grades
- Incomplete or poor quality of work
- Increased absence or reluctance to go to school
- Forgetful, memory loss
- Overachievement – trying to be perfect
- Underachievement – giving up
- Inattentiveness
- Excessive daydreaming

Emotional

- Insecurity, issues of abandonment, safety concerns
- Concern over being treated differently from others
- Fear, guilt, anger, regret, sadness, confusion
- “I don’t care” attitude
- Depression, hopelessness, intense sadness
- Overly sensitive, frequently tearful, irritable
- Appears unaffected by change/loss/death
- Preoccupation with wanting details
- Recurring thoughts of suicide, death

Behavioral

- Disruptive behaviors, noisy outbursts
- Aggressive behaviors, frequent fighting
- Non-compliance to requests
- Increase in risk-taking or unsafe behaviors
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Regressive behaviors to time when things felt more safe and in control
- High need for attention
- A need to check in with parent/significant other

Social

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Withdrawal from activities and sports
- Use of alcohol and drugs
- Changes in relationships with peers and teachers
- Changes in family roles
- Wanting to be physically close to a safe adult
- Sexual acting out
- Stealing, shoplifting
- Difficulty being in a group or crowd

continued . . .

Responses of Grieving Child/Youth (continued)

Physical

- Stomachaches, headaches, heartaches
- Frequent accidents or injuries
- Nightmares, dreams or sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite or increased eating
- Low energy, weakness
- Nausea, upset stomach, hives, rash, etc.
- Increased illness, low resistance
- Rapid heartbeat

Spiritual

- Anger at God/Higher Power
- Questions of "Why me?" or "Why now?"
- Questions about meaning of life
- Confusion
- Feelings of being alone in the universe
- Doubting or questioning current beliefs
- Sense of meaninglessness about the future
- Changes in values, questioning what is important

How to Help . . .

Infants and Toddlers

Lots of holding, additional nurturing, and physical contact; Consistent routine, including regular meal and bed times; Rules and limits which are concrete and specific; Short, truthful statements about what happened; Making time for play, both physical and imaginative

Preschool Child

Use simple and honest answers; Be prepared to answer same questions over and over again; Include child in rituals around loss/death; Support child in his/her play; Allow anger and physical expression; Maintain consistent routines; Allow to act younger for awhile; Hold, nurture, and give lots of physical attention; Encourage/allow fun and happy times; Have books available; Model by sharing personal anecdotes as appropriate

Elementary School Child

Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible; Provide creative outlets (art, music, journal, etc.); Help identify and use support systems; Work with student around academic workload; Encourage taking breaks and some time alone; Allow for expression of feelings and emotions; Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility; Give choices whenever possible; Share that you care and are thinking about them; Create "safe space" for child to go to as needed

Middle School Youth

Expect mood swings; Provide supportive environment where students can share, when needed; Anticipate physical concerns, illness, body aches and pains; Allow to choose with whom and how he/she gets support; Encourage participation in school-based educational support group; Allow flexibility in completing school work

High School Youth

Allow for regression and dependency; Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, and regret; Understand and allow for variation in maturity level; Answer questions honestly and provide factual information; Model appropriate responses; Avoid power struggles and allow choices; Help understand and resolve feelings of helplessness; Assist in plans for completion of school assignments; Encourage participation in school-based educational support group

For more information: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>



Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

Fostering Resilience in Kids

Resiliency is defined as the the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity. An increasing body of research is showing that most people – especially kids, can bounce back from risks, stress, crisis, trauma, and experience life success.

When kids are asked who and what has contributed to their resilience, they most often name individual people in their lives first . . . then they go on to mention activities, opportunities, classes or – occasionally – programs.

The key to fostering resilience in the school setting is for educators to decrease the number of risk factors students encounter and in turn, increase the number of protective factors or positive environmental, behavioral, and emotional circumstances that buffer kids from the challenges in their lives and encourage them to succeed.

**Reducing
Risk Factors**

+

**Increasing
Protective
Factors**

=

Resilience

Those conditions, attitudes, and behaviors that occur around and within communities, families, schools, teens (kids), and their friends that increase the likelihood that individuals will have difficulty with school, the law, alcohol and other drugs, violence and abuse.

Those conditions that buffer kids from the negative consequences of exposure to risks by either reducing the impact of risks or changing the way a person responds to the risk by promoting positive behavior, health, well-being, and personal success.

The capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply the stress that is inherent in today's world.

Four Steps to Help Educators Foster Resilience

Step

1

Always communicate the “resiliency attitude”

Fostering resilience begins with an attitude, expressed verbally and non-verbally, that communicates, “I see what is right with you, no matter what you have done in the past, no matter what problems you currently face. Your strengths are more powerful than your ‘risks.’ And whatever risks, problems, and adversity you are facing you are on the road to bouncing back – they are not the end of the road!”

Step 2

Focus on strengths with same or even greater meticulousness than used in characterizing weaknesses



Characteristics

Characteristics of Resilient Kids

Social Competence – Responsiveness; flexibility; empathy; caring; communication skills; sense of humor; other prosocial behaviors.

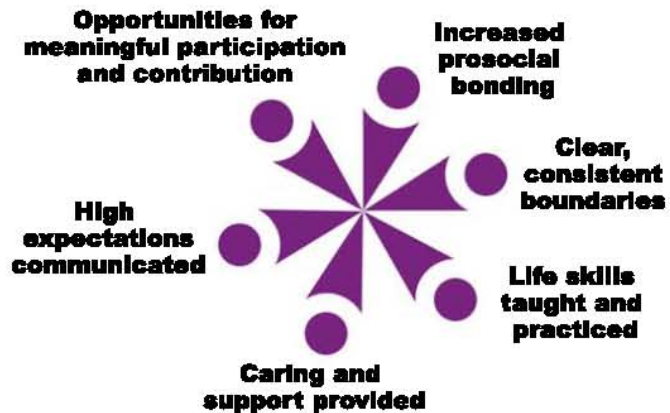
Problem Solving – Ability to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly; ability to attempt alternative solutions for both cognitive and social problems.

Autonomy – Strong sense of independence; internal locus of control; sense of personal power, self esteem, and self-efficacy; self-discipline; impulse control; ability to separate self from environment.

Sense of Purpose – Healthy expectancies; goal-directed; success/achievement orientation; persistence; hopefulness; hardiness; sense of anticipation and compelling future.

Step 3

Build “resiliency web” around each kid in the classroom by providing:



Step 4

Maintain a “never give up!” Attitude

It is clear that fostering resilience doesn't happen as a result of shuffling kids through a program. Something all caring adults can convey is an attitude of optimism and encouragement, a focus on strengths, and a commitment to weaving standards from the resiliency web into kids' lives. Persistence, in these approaches will help kids overcome obstacles and not just “survive” but “thrive”.

Tips to Foster Resilience in the Classroom

- Be caring and supportive
- Provide clear and consistent expectations
- Foster positive attitudes
- Nurture positive behaviors and emotions
- Develop feelings of competence
- Promote positive social connections
- Encourage helping others
- Teach problem-solving and peace-building skills
- Ensure healthy habits
- Recognize and assist with stress reduction

For more information: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>



Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

WELCOME HOME

Military Kids, Homecoming & Reunion

Homecomings and reunions are the last stage in the deployment process and is a time of celebration as well as change. Military family members, particularly kids, experience a wide variety of feelings before, during, and after being reunited. All of these feelings are perfectly healthy and normal given the fact they have been separated for several months and have adapted to life without one another. In fact, there are three stages military families experience as a result of the reunion experience and these are as follows: anticipation, readjustment, and stabilization.

Anticipation:

The weeks and days before homecoming and reunion are filled with excitement, nervousness, tension, and relief. During deployment family members have learned to adjust to the absence of the service member one in day-to-day activities. Reuniting again simultaneously brings both joy and anxiety because daily life as a military family is about to change again.

Readjustment:

As anticipation of the homecoming and reunion fades, and the family is reunited once again, daily roles, responsibilities, and rules are renegotiated. Experts have identified two time periods specific to this sometimes challenging stage:

Honeymoon (Usually until the first serious disagreement)

- ◆ Feelings of euphoria, relief
- ◆ Blur of excitement
- ◆ Catching up and sharing experiences
- ◆ Beginning to readjust to intimacy

Readjustment (Approximately 6-8 weeks)

- ◆ Pressures of daily life intensify
- ◆ Sensitivity to service member ones presence
- ◆ Increased tension as daily relationships confront reality

Stabilization:

The amount of time it takes families to stabilize during homecoming and reunion varies. Many of them encounter only minor difficulties in adjusting to new routines. For others, however, readjustment may be a longer process that requires additional support. Seeking assistance, if needed, is critical to helping all families navigate homecoming and reunion in a healthy and positive manner.



Kids Reactions to Service Member's Return

Ages	Reactions	Techniques to reconnect
Birth to 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cries • Fusses • Pulls away • Clings to other spouse/caregiver • Has problems with elimination • Changes sleeping and eating habits • Does not recognize service member 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold the baby; hug him/her a lot • Bathe and change baby • Feed and play with him/her • Relax and be patient • He/she will warm up in a while
1 to 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shyness • Clinging • Does not recognize service member • Cries • Has temper tantrums • Regresses – no longer toilet trained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't force holding, hugging, kissing • Give them space • Give them time to warm up • Be gentle and fun • Sit, play, and interact at their level
4 to 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates anger • Acts out to get attention; needs proof you're real • Is demanding • Feels guilty for making service member go away • Talks a lot to bring service member up to date 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to them • Accept their feelings • Play with them • Reinforce that they are loved • Find out the new things in their lives (books, TV, preschool) • He/she will warm up in a while
6 to 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels he/she isn't good enough • Dreads return because of discipline • Boasts about military parent/loved one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review pictures, schoolwork activities, scrap books • Praise what they have accomplished during absence • Try not to criticize • Get involved in their education
13 to 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is excited • Feels guilty because they don't live up to standards • In concerned about rules and responsibilities • Feels too old or is unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent • Is rebellious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share what has happened during absence • Listen with undivided attention • Don't be judgmental • Respect privacy and friends • Don't tease about their interests including fashion, music, etc. • Get involved in their education

Tips for Educators

Focus on students and the classroom learning environment – Retain routines and emphasis on the importance of learning while always leaving room to tend to individual student needs.

Provide structure – Maintain predictable schedule with clear behavioral guidelines and consequences to maintain safe and caring classroom. If student is distressed about the family homecoming, find appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs, fears, hopes, and wishes.

Maintain objectivity – Respond in a calm and caring manner to student inquiries and answer questions in simple, direct terms. Regardless of political beliefs, refrain from expressing personal opinions.

Be patient and reduce student workload as needed – Expect temporary slow downs or disruptions in learning when a homecoming and reunion occurs.

Listen – Be approachable, attentive, and sensitive to the unique needs of students coping with homecoming and reunion. Let kids know they can speak individually with you or a school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker about their questions and concerns. Take time to acknowledge the circumstances and answer student questions as needed in a factual manner.

Be sensitive to language and cultural needs – Be aware of, knowledgeable about, and sensitive to the language, values, and beliefs of other cultures in order to assist students and their families appropriately. Inquire about school, community, and military resources available to assist kids and their families in coping in healthy ways.

Acknowledge and validate feelings – Help students develop a realistic understanding of homecoming and reunion. Provide reassurance that their feelings of excitement, joy, nervousness, tension, and relief are normal responses and all individuals and their families adjust to the changes involved with reunion at a different pace.

For more information: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP, - OSPI, Program Supervisor
 Information for this article adapted from Deployment and Reunion Guides for Ages 3-6, 7 to 12,
and "Army Brat Pack" for Teens by USARPAC Child and Youth Services and Working with Military Children, A Primer for School Personnel by Virginia Joint Military Family Services Board



Talking to Kids About Violence, Terrorism, and War

Kids ask tough questions particularly when it comes to understanding acts of violence, terrorism, and war. Given this, educators may find themselves in the unique position of engaging with kids about these very important issues.

In their day-to-day interactions, educators have the unique opportunity to help kids understand current world events factually, to facilitate open and healthy discussions about how these events impact kids' lives, and to help kids take action to identify their own emotional and behavioral reactions to these events.

How Educators Can Offer Support



Listen to Kids

- Find out what kids are worried about, what information they have or don't have, and how they are interpreting what is being said.
- Encourage them to take the first step in sharing by asking open-ended questions.
- Offer information, clarification, and reassurance as needed.
- Don't overwhelm kids by explaining the details of what you know.
- Listen, listen and listen even more!



Ask questions

- Ask thoughtful open-ended questions, ones which can't be answered with "yes" or "no," as a good way to get a conversation started, particularly with an older child.
- Specific questions such as, "What are you afraid of?" "What bothers you most about what you are hearing?" and "How does this make you feel?" are appropriate for discussion.
- Ask clarifying questions to find out what kids mean. Remember their ideas of violence and war may be very different from yours.
- And remember to answer kids' question(s) after they have answered yours.



Acknowledge kids' feelings

- Knowing what to say is sometimes difficult. When no words come to mind, saying "This is really hard," will work.
- Try to recognize feelings underlying kids' reactions and help them identify these feelings in healthy ways through play, drawing, or words.
- When kids are upset, don't deny the seriousness of the situation.
- Be honest with kids. When appropriate, share your fears and concerns while at the same time reassuring them things will be okay.



Help kids to feel physically safe

- Help them differentiate between acts of violence, terrorism, and war and understand that precautions are being taken to keep their environment safe.
- Maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security.
- Stop kids from stereotyping people from specific backgrounds, cultures, or countries.
- Add tolerance lessons to school curriculum to prevent harassment and improve a sense of safety.
- Let those who are worried about a parent/loved one's deployment talk and share their feelings as needed. *(See Tough Topics Issue #1: Supporting Military Kids During Deployment for more information)*



Help kids maintain a sense of hope by taking action

- Help kids find their own unique ways to offer support to their schools and communities in response to incidents of violence, terrorism, and war.
- Send letters, cookies, magazines, or care packages to those in the military or local public safety positions/jobs.
- Encourage kids to write or dictate letters to legislators about their concerns and feelings.

How Educators Can Offer Support (cont.)



Expect and respond to changes in behavior

- Kids will most likely display signs of stress. Immature, aggressive, and oppositional behaviors are normal reactions to uncertainty.
- Remember it is important to maintain consistent expectations for behavior and hold kids accountable.
- Kids may pretend play or use drawing/art to express their varied emotions. Encourage positive expressions for these healthy behavioral and emotional outlets.
- Day-to-day support, consistency, and patience will help kids return to routines and their usual behavior patterns.
- For kids exhibiting signs of severe stress it is important to refer them for additional professional school/community assistance to help them cope effectively.



Coordinate between school and home

- Create a sense of collective security between school and home. This will help kids feel safe and provide a sense of protection.
- Teachers should let parents/caregivers know if kids are exhibiting stress in school. Provide helpful suggestions or information on school and community resources available for support.
- Parents/caregivers need to let school personnel know if a family member/loved one is called to active duty so schools can provide needed understanding and support.
- Invite parents/caregivers with relevant professional experience to come to school and talk about their jobs, in age-appropriate terms, and how their skills contribute to safety at home.

Tips for talking to kids about tough stuff . . .

Be aware of time and place – Kids need time, attention, and a safe environment to discuss their perceptions, understanding, fears, worries, and concerns.

Take the first step – It's often necessary for adults to initiate dialogue themselves. A good starting point is to ask kids how they think and feel about what they have heard.

Look for opportunities to start a discussion – Adults/caregivers should not be afraid to look for opportunities to discuss issues as they arise.

Focus on kids feelings and thoughts – It is important to provide kids opportunities to openly talk about their thoughts and feelings without judgment, suggestion, or lecturing about issues.

Listen to and address kids feelings – You may be surprised by kids' concerns so addressing personal fears may be necessary.

Reassure kids – Explore issues together and maintain routines and structure. Avoid "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information.

Provide facts and information – Provide kids with facts and basic information consistent with age and maturity and don't misinform them or provide a false sense of safety.

Model open discussion – Caring adults can help kids open up about their own thoughts and feelings by taking the lead and appropriately sharing their own thoughts and feelings. Be careful to monitor your own communications and avoid making generalizations which dehumanize the situation.

Provide an ongoing forum for kids to initiate discussion and ask questions – Answering questions and addressing fears doesn't happen all at once. New issues arise over time and discussions should occur on an ongoing basis as needed.

Emphasize that challenges are opportunities – Discussions about controversial issues are a good time to remind kids that challenges can also provide opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute to our world in healthy ways.

For additional copies of this publication visit: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>

For more information on this topic visit: New York University Child Study Center - <http://www.aboutourkids.org>
Educators for Social Responsibility - <http://www.esrnational.org/home.htm>
Military One Source - <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP, Program Supervisor

Information for this article adapted from: *Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (Second Edition)*, by New York University Child Study Center; *Talking to Children About War and Violence In The World*, by Sheldon Berman, Sam Diener, Larry Dieringer, and Linda Lantieri, Educators for Social Responsibility; *Children and Fear of War and Terrorism* by National Association of School Psychologists; and *Talking With Children About Violence and War*, Military One Source.



Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

Dealing with Death

When schools experience a crisis involving one or more deaths, everyone—adults and kids alike—grieve the death of individuals as well as the inevitable changes that occur as a result of the loss. While we can prepare ourselves to manage crisis, nothing really prepares us for the grief experienced after a death, and unfortunately, there are no quick fixes.

The information below is designed to equip educators and other caring adults with a basic understanding of how to effectively yet sensitively support kids when a death occurs.

Kids Dealing With Death Have The Right To:

- Know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances.
- Have questions answered honestly.
- Be heard with dignity and respect.
- Be silent, if they choose, and not share their grief emotions/thoughts.
- Not agree with adult perceptions or conclusions.
- See the person who died and the place of death if desired.
- Grieve any way they want without hurting themselves or others.
- Feel all their feelings and think the thoughts of their own unique grief.
- Not follow the “stages of grief” as outlined in textbooks.
- Have irrational guilt about how they could have intervened to stop the death.
- Grieve in their own unique, individual way without censorship.
- Be angry at death and the circumstances surrounding it.
- Have their own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- Be involved in rituals related to death and closure such as funerals and memorials.
- Not be taken advantage of in their vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances.

Developmental Impact and How to Help

Pre-School
Infants/Toddlers

Infants or Toddlers: Have intuitive sense that something serious has happened, even if they don't fully understand it; read expressions and sense emotions in the environment; reactions are sensory and physical.

Common Behaviors: General anxiety; crying; sleeplessness; excessive sleep; stomach problems; clinginess, need to be held; separation anxiety; biting; throwing things; regression through baby talk, bed wetting; irritability; temper tantrums; clumsiness.

- How To Help:**
- ◆ Lots of holding, additional nurturing, and physical contact.
 - ◆ Consistent routine, including regular meal and bed times.
 - ◆ Rules and limits that are concrete and specific.
 - ◆ Short, truthful statements about what has happened.
 - ◆ Time for play, both physical and imaginative, to help process death.

Pre-School Children: Believe the world revolves around them and they “cause” things to happen. Have no cognitive understanding of death and often experience it as abandonment; emotional and behavioral responses at this age are often brief but intense.

Common Behaviors: Changes in eating and sleeping patterns; frequently regress to earlier behaviors; want to be dressed or fed.

- How To Help:**
- ◆ Use honest and simple answers.
 - ◆ Be prepared to answer same question(s) over and over.
 - ◆ Include in rituals around death, saying goodbye.
 - ◆ Support in their play to act out grief.
 - ◆ Allow for anger and safe physical expression of feelings.
 - ◆ Maintain consistent structure and routines.
 - ◆ Allow to act younger, regress for a while.
 - ◆ Hold, nurture, and provide physical attention.
 - ◆ Encourage and allow fun, happy times.
 - ◆ Have books on death and grief available.
 - ◆ Model by sharing personal anecdotes, as appropriate.

Elementary

Elementary School Students: Are concrete thinkers developing logical patterns along with increased language and cognitive ability; question how life will be different, what will be the same, and how one knows a person is really dead; want to see death as reversible, but also beginning to understand it is final.

Common Behaviors: Regression to earlier behaviors; fighting, anger; difficulty in paying attention and concentrating; daydreaming; not completing homework assignments; sleepiness, come to school tired; withdrawal; not unusual for questions and play related to death to be graphic and gory.

How To Help:

- ◆ Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible.
- ◆ Help students identify and use available support systems.
- ◆ Work with students around academic workload.
- ◆ Encourage students to take a break and have time alone.
- ◆ Allow for expression of feelings and emotions.
- ◆ Provide art, journal, music, and/or physical outlets for grief.
- ◆ Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility.
- ◆ Give student choices whenever possible.
- ◆ Let student know you care and are thinking about them.
- ◆ Assign students a buddy who can support him/her.
- ◆ Create a "safe space" for students to go when needed.

Middle School

Middle School Students: Are more verbal and cognitively process information at higher levels; comprehend death as final and unavoidable which may provoke feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and increase risk-taking behaviors.

Common Behaviors: Physical responses including headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances and changes in eating habits; argumentative; withdrawal; sullenness; anger and fighting; sleepiness; lack of concentration and attentiveness; risk-taking behaviors (drugs, sexual acting out, stealing); unpredictable ups and downs or moodiness; erratic, inconsistent reactions.

How To Help:

- ◆ Expect and accept mood swings.
- ◆ Provide a supportive environment where students can share, when needed.
- ◆ Anticipate increased physical concerns including illness, body aches, and pains.
- ◆ Answer questions honestly and provide factual information.
- ◆ Allow student to choose whom and how he/she gets support.
- ◆ Encourage participation in a school-based educational support group.
- ◆ Allow some flexibility in completing school work.
- ◆ Encourage physical outlets to release grief.

High School

High School Students: Are philosophical about life and death but believe it won't happen to them; appear to use "adult" approaches of problem solving and abstract thinking in order to deal with grief; may fight against emotional vulnerability caused by death because they want to be independent.

Common Behaviors: Withdrawal from other parents and adults; angry outbursts; increased risk-taking behaviors (substance use or abuse, reckless driving, sexual behaviors); pushing limits of rules; lack of concentration; inability to focus; hanging out with a small group of friends; sad face, evidence of crying; sleepiness, exhaustion; feel responsible for taking care of others—particularly siblings.

How To Help:

- ◆ Allow for regression and dependency.
- ◆ Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, and regret.
- ◆ Understand and allow for variation in maturity level.
- ◆ Answer questions honestly and provide factual information.
- ◆ Avoid power struggles and allow choices.
- ◆ Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness.
- ◆ Allow for flexibility in completing school assignments.
- ◆ Model appropriate responses, showing students your own grief.



**Behaviors Indicating
The Need For
Professional Help:**

- Suicidal thoughts or behaviors.
- Chronic physical symptoms without organic findings.
- Depression with impaired self-esteem.
- Persistent denial of death with delayed or absent grieving.
- Progressive isolation and lack of interest in any activity.
- Resistant anger and hostility.
- Intense preoccupation with memories of deceased.
- Prolonged changes in typical behavior.
- Use of alcohol, tobacco and/or drugs.
- Prolonged feeling of guilt or responsibility for the death.
- Major and continued changes in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Risk-taking behavior including identifying with the deceased in unsafe ways.

For additional copies of this publication visit: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP, Program Supervisor

Information for this article adapted from *Helping Children Cope with Death - Helping the Grieving Students: A Guide for Teachers*; *When Death Impacts Your School* - by the Dougy Center; and *National Center for Grieving Children and Families*; www.dougy.org