

Helping
MILITARY CHILDREN
Handle Loss



Family Guidebook



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A Note From Trevor...

Learning to cope when someone you love dies is one of the hardest things you can do. It's something you will have to deal with for the rest of your life. My father died in 1997 and I am still finding new ways to cope with his loss. Grief is hard for anyone to deal with, but for children, losing someone close to them is especially tough. Most kids won't have dealt with death before, and to them it will be a new and frightening experience.

Over the years, I have worked with thousands of military kids, speaking to them about the challenges they face every day. If there is one thing I have learned, it is to listen to what children are asking for instead of telling them what we think they need to hear. Coping with loss is no different. You have to listen to children and let them lead you through their grief, using your experience to guide them and answer their questions. While you shouldn't force a child to face their grief, the sooner you let them know you are there for them and open to their questions, the sooner they may be ready to share their feelings.

This guidebook has been created to help you support children who have lost a loved one. It provides steps and activities that will help children learn how to cope with their loss. When they are ready, the DVD, *What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* is a good starting place, giving them a story they can relate to. The *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* book provides answers to some of the common questions children ask after someone dies, while the *Grief Journal* will give them a place to work through things they may not be ready to talk about. The *Memory Box* is a safe place for them to place keepsakes and special items that remind them of their loved one, and *Coco*, the plush mouse, is a friend who is there for them no matter what.

I am very proud and honored to be able to work with military children and it is a privilege to share what I have learned with you during this difficult time. I believe that the contents of this guidebook will be extremely helpful to you as you provide love and comfort to your amazing kids.

Trevor Romain

When a Loved One has Died

How can I deal with my own grief and also help my family cope? When should I tell my children? What am I going to say? Losing someone during military service is a tremendously difficult and emotional experience. Death is very personal, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve and mourn as you try to come to terms with your loss.



Telling your child about the death of their loved one can be one of the hardest things to do, but it is also one of the most important. Every situation is different, but the sooner a child is told what has happened and is given enough information to understand it fully, the sooner they can start the process of grieving. **When talking to children about death, emotions will be running high, so try to speak simply and to the point. With younger children, talk to their age level so they can better understand what has happened.**

THIS GUIDEBOOK WILL COVER:

- Learning how to talk to children about death
- Understanding how children grieve
- Why military grief is unique
- Helping children cope
- Appreciating the ways bereavement can affect your family

For children, coping with the shock and grief of losing someone in the line of duty is especially difficult. Most children have little experience with death and will not know how to deal with the range of intense emotions they are feeling. They need help to understand and cope with these feelings and will look to their caregivers and trusted adults for guidance.

People who have experienced loss say the feelings of grief are like riding an emotional roller coaster. Expect to have good days and bad. Give yourself time. Rely on family, friends, and your community to support you and your children through your grief. And, when you are ready, seek out the resources available to you through the military and governmental agencies.

How to Use this Guidebook

The goal of this guidebook is to provide you with some tips and resources to help your children process their grief. Just like adults, children will grieve in their own unique way. Unfortunately, you can't take their hurt away, rush them through their grief, or protect them from pain. They will need time and comfort to find a healthy place for their grief so they can move on.

With your patience, support, and encouragement, your children can prove themselves to be resilient in the face of tragic loss.

How to Talk About Death with Your Child



How do I know what to say? What if I say something wrong?

Even as adults we feel uncomfortable when talking about death, so it's normal to feel nervous when talking about death with children. You might be worried that all it will do is upset them and cause them more pain. But talking about the death with your children, and making yourself available to them if they want to talk, can be one of the best ways to comfort them. Talking with a loved one can help them feel connected and give them a much needed sense of security. Listen and be honest. Remember, it's okay to say, "I don't know."

Let your children be your guide. If they bring it up, let them talk it out and answer their questions as best you can (even the tough ones). If they have trouble, help them find words to express what they are feeling. When they are done, reassure them it is okay if they want to talk about it again in the future.

When talking with your child, it is helpful to sit physically close. Hold hands and hug them.

- With younger children, expect them to ask the same questions and talk about the same details over and over. Repetition is their way of processing and understanding what happened.
- Don't make talking about death or your loved one a taboo subject. If you avoid talking about it, your children may shy away from sharing their feelings with you.
- Keeping a journal can give children a place to express their feelings where they might not feel comfortable otherwise.
- Writing a letter or message to their loved one, where they have a chance to say good-bye, can help children find closure.

Talking Tips for Infants and Toddlers

- Younger children may not understand what has happened or have the words to express themselves.
- Watch your child's body language for clues about how they are feeling. Slouching or holding their head down could mean they need extra hugs.
- Younger children will also use play and games to express themselves.
- Exercise and physical exertion can help children release their stress and emotions and keep them from feeling overwhelmed.

Talking Tips for Preschoolers

- Don't give them too much information at once. Use simple, short explanations to help them understand.
- Try not to use terms like "sleep" or "sick." Younger children may confuse normal sleep or all sickness with death, so be specific when you can.
- Tell them you love them. Preschoolers will need frequent reassurance that they will be cared for and loved.
- Art and drawing can help children work through complex feelings.

Talking Tips for School-Age Children

- Kids at this age are old enough to understand what has happened. Providing them with appropriate information and facts can help their grief process.
- School-age children may feel more comfortable expressing themselves by art or writing than through talking.
- Help them share what they are feeling. Give them words to express themselves, like "stress," "sad," or "feeling overwhelmed."

Talking Tips for Adolescents

- Give older kids and teens space to work out their feelings on their own.
- Watch for any risky behavior. Let them know you are there for them if they need to talk.
- When appropriate, involve teens in decisions and conversations about their loved one. It will allow them to feel needed and useful and give them a sense of control.

Children and the Funeral

The funeral can be a difficult and emotional moment for children. Even so, if it is appropriate, it can be important for your children's grief process for them to be there.

Before the funeral, tell your children what to expect, especially if you are having a military funeral. Have them ask questions and give them reassurances.

- Assign an adult family member or friend to be at the funeral for each child. You will be dealing with your own feelings. Have the adult read this guidebook too.
- Giving your child a small token that belonged to their loved one can comfort them during the funeral: A button from a shirt, coin, small photo, something they can hold and keep in their pocket.
- Make a plan with your children for the funeral. Give them options about how they want to be involved.
- Include your children in discussions about the funeral so that they are not surprised.
- Giving your child a job at the funeral can help them feel in control.

“Thank you very much for making that memory box.

The USO gave us the Grief Kit after my step dad died in Afghanistan. My little brother was crying all the time.



I put lots of good pictures in the box and notes and some stuff. I put that one special picture, the one at the canyon during my birthday. My step dad was hugging me and we were all laughing after his hat fell in the river. I love that mouse doll too. That was a good thing for the box.”

-Lesley, a military child survivor

Understanding How Children Grieve

When faced with the loss of a loved one, each child will react in their own way, grieve in their own way, and cope in their own way. Anger, shock, numbness, anxiety, denial, and fear are all normal grief reactions. Some children will cry or talk about their feelings while others might act as if everything is fine.

Many children will feel guilt and blame themselves. A significant factor in a child's response is their age. How old a child is impacts not only how they react, but also how they understand what death means.

Infants and Toddlers

At first, young children may not fully grasp what has happened and what it means to them. They have no understanding of death and don't have the words or ability to ask questions and express their feelings. But young children are very sensitive to the emotions of their caregivers and will react to the stress and sadness they feel. Toddlers will look to you for guidance and reassurance.

Common Reactions

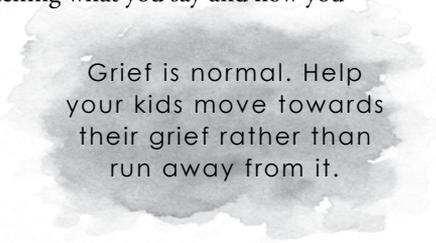
- Increased clinginess
- Crying, tantrums, and a return to earlier behaviors
- Outbursts, protests, and aggressive behavior

Preschoolers

Even though preschoolers are able to talk about how they are feeling, their expressions for grief will be limited. They do not understand that death is permanent and they may have unreal thoughts that death can be reversed or undone. Their sense of security will be threatened, and they may worry what would happen to them if you die as well. They will mimic your grief response, watching what you say and how you express your feelings.

Common Reactions

- Helplessness, nightmares, and new fears
- Aggressive play
- Confusion and neediness



Grief is normal. Help your kids move towards their grief rather than run away from it.

School-Age Children

While school-age children will understand that death is permanent, they may still have unrealistic reactions. They may blame themselves, thinking something they did or said caused the death. School-age children may become overly sensitive to death, worrying that if it happened once it can happen again, shaking their sense of security.

Common Reactions

- Disruptive behaviors and repeated questions about the death and dying
- Guilt, worry, and concern about someone else dying
- Trouble sleeping, headaches, and safety concerns

Adolescents

Most teenagers have the same understanding of death that adults have. While they will be fully able to express their feelings and emotions, they will also feel the true impact of the loss. Teenagers will realize what family events their loved one will miss and start to grasp what it will be like not having their support. The idea of their own death will become real.

Common Reactions

- May withdraw and hide their feelings
- Social anxiety, loss of interest in friends and things they used to enjoy
- Trouble concentrating and having issues at school

“The Grief Comfort Kit helps children express their feelings, gives them permission to feel good, helps children know that other kids have experienced what they’re going through, and that they will get through this.”



-Courtney Trimmer, Elementary School Counselor

Why Military Grief is Unique

The depth of losing a loved one cannot be measured, and each family will be affected in their own way. As their caregiver, you will have to manage your own grief while helping your children cope with theirs.

It is important to understand that losing someone on active duty is different than civilian loss. The long separation during deployment is a unique issue with the military. The absence of their loved one can keep children from admitting the death is real and can also get in the way of the child’s grief process.

Another unique issue is the community awareness of the death. Friends, neighbors, classmates, and sometimes the media will all know about the loss and may bring unwanted attention to your child. For children, this can confuse what should be an intensely private moment with a public event and make them feel isolated.

Families that live on military bases face yet another challenge. When a military parent dies, their families may have to move off the base. This

can be an extremely difficult challenge to a child's sense of security. All at once they can lose their home, the familiarity of their schools and routine, and the support of their friends.

Because the nature of the loss is sudden and the circumstances can be difficult to discuss, some children may have a more intense grief reaction. This reaction, called *traumatic grief*, has some similarities to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can keep a child from coping in a healthy way. **If you feel your child is having a traumatic grief reaction, or if your child's behavior is scary to you, seek professional help from their school, your doctor, or a counselor.**

The Difference Between Grief and Mourning

Grief is the complex emotional reactions to loss. *Mourning* is the formal process responding to loss (the funeral, family and religious traditions).

With all these challenges, you can easily feel overwhelmed, but being there for each other and learning to grieve together can make family bonds stronger, bring each of you closer, and help you cope with your loss.

Warning Signs

Even adults struggle with the emotions of grief. It's understandable that some

kids may have trouble dealing with these emotions as well, even with the support of their family. It is important to be alert to your child's response. Be mindful of the signs of traumatic grief and PTSD and seek the guidance of a mental health professional if you have any questions. Some signs to watch out for are:

- If your child seems stuck, if their grief reaction continues over time without seeming to get any better, or if it gets worse
- If your child seems overly fixated on death
- If your child's grief is prolonged, interferes with their schoolwork, keeps them from enjoying themselves, or if they stop being with friends
- Frequent bed wetting or if they continually can't sleep or have nightmares
- Change in appetite or developing unhealthy habits
- Spending too much time alone
- Persistent fear of being away from their caregiver
- Acting out, extreme emotions, or aggressive outbursts
- Hurting themselves or talking about hurting themselves

Signs of PTSD

- Fixating on details of their loved one's death
- Nightmares about their loved one's death, dying, and war
- Unreasonable avoidance of reminders of their loved one or their death
- Overly anxious, unable to be comforted, or new recurring fears

“The kids were so excited to have a special place to store the treasured memories of their loved ones. When asked what they will put in their box, students said ‘a piece of my mom’s jewelry I have,’ ‘a picture of my grandfather in his army uniform,’ and ‘a picture of dogs because my aunt had eight dogs.’ It is so important and it means so much to them to have ways to honor their memories.”

— A 4th and 5th Grade Group Grief Counselor

Helping Military Children Cope After Loss



Children face adversity best when they feel secure. Stability, support, comfort, and routine all add to their sense of security and help them manage their stress and anxiety.

- Keep them to a routine and be predictable yourself.
- Be honest and encourage questions.
- Be understanding and available.
- Offer encouragement and give them hope.
- A reassuring arm around their shoulder, holding hands, sitting next to them, hugs and affection can sometimes help when words can't.

Caregiver Tips

Understanding and Stability

You are the main stabilizing presence in their life.

- Remind children that you are there and will take care of them. Some children will worry about what will happen if you also die. Having a plan and sharing it with them will help them feel safe. Say things like, “I will do everything I can to keep myself and you safe.”
- Turn off the TV and keep an eye out for troubling news reports. Graphic military stories and reminders can be difficult for children.
- Seek out support groups and camps for bereaved military families. Being around people facing similar circumstance can help your family feel less isolated and give them an understanding peer group.

Children model their response after their caregivers. Don't hide your grief. Let them know you feel sad too.

Commemorating and Maintaining the Connection

Try to keep the memory of their loved one in their thoughts.

- Tell stories, keep photos around the home, watch home movies, and share family memories.
- Give your child a shirt or special memento, something of their loved one they can touch and hold and that is theirs to keep.
- Build a new family tradition to commemorate their memory. Eating their favorite meal or bringing their favorite flowers when you visit their memorial.

Communication

It is important to keep everyone who is involved with your children informed.

- Keep their school and teachers up to date on what your child is going through.
- At all ages, even pre-school, you can send notes with your children to school with any concerns or questions you might have.
- Make sure other caregivers, family members, teachers, and friends are sensitive to what your child is experiencing. Extra attention from all adults can help.

Coping Tips for Infants and Toddlers

- Don't hide your feelings from your child. Young children learn how to cope from watching you.
- Display photos that have the loved one with the child.
- Give plenty of hugs and affection. Physical contact reassures a child and makes them feel safe.
- Try as best you can to maintain old routines.

Coping Tips for Preschoolers

- Let them know it's still okay for them to play and have fun.
- Try to keep to old routines and let them know when plans change so they aren't surprised.
- Plan for time together. If you have more than one child, make sure you plan one-on-one time with each of them.

Coping Tips for School-Age Kids

- School-age kids respond to stress and grief through their behavior rather than with words. You may need to relax some rules and exercise patience as they work through their feelings.
- Help them deal with their mood swings and give them healthy ways to channel their emotions. If they are angry, let them hit a pillow.
- Give them some time to be a kid. Encourage play time with friends.

Coping Tips for Adolescents

- Teens may not want to bother you with their feelings. Sharing your sadness and how you cope with grief can be an invitation for them to share with you.
- Teens don't have the life experience to deal with grief on their own. They may need help handling their emotions. Let them know you are there for them if they need to talk.
- Make sure they have a trusted adult who will listen and talk with them, and with whom they can ask questions.



How Bereavement Affects Military Families



When an active duty service member dies, their families face many changes. The surviving spouse is now a single parent. The family has to transition from military to civilian life, and if they live on-base, they will have to move. Navigating these transitions with your family can be difficult, but not impossible.

Taking Care of Yourself is Priority #1

Taking care of yourself is an extremely important part of this process. Your family is not only relying on your support, but they are looking to you for guidance on ways to deal with their own feelings. If you don't take care of yourself, it will be harder to help your family cope.

- Be an example. Keep to a routine and try to model healthy coping.
- Take time for yourself. Lean on family members and friends for support and help.
- Get enough sleep and exercise and don't skip meals.

If you feel like you are having trouble coping, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Seek Support

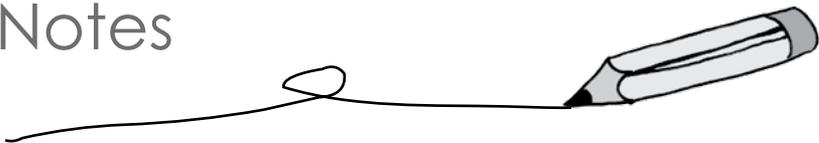
With the support of family and friends and the resources available to you from the military, taking care of your family during this difficult time doesn't have to be overwhelming. Look to the Where to Get Help section at the end of this guide for more resources.

Conclusion

Being in a military family, you may have understood the risks and tried to prepare, but there is no way to know how your family will respond to losing a loved one. Each family member will react in their own way. Coping with the loss of a loved one is a lifelong process, and reactions will change over time. No matter how hard, facing adversity together, as a family, is easier than alone. When you can, try to include your family members as much as possible. Ask for their help and opinions. Share your grief. Draw strength from each other and work together to cope and move forward.



Notes



Where to Get Help

Your Casualty Assistance Officer

No matter the branch of military, you will be assigned a casualty assistance officer who will assist you in taking full advantage of all the military benefits for which you are eligible. Your casualty assistance officer will assist you with everything from funeral and burial arrangements to legal assistance and monetary compensation. Even after you feel like direct assistance is no longer required, you can still contact the casualty headquarters offices of your branch at any time down the line with any further questions.

The USO

www.uso.org

The USO offers a variety of programs and services that support the morale, welfare, social and entertainment needs of American service men and women and their families.

Survivor Outreach Services

www.myarmyonesource.com/FamilyProgramsandServices/SurvivingFamilies/SurvivorOutreachServices.aspx

An Army service whose mission is to build a unified support program which embraces and reassures Survivors that they are continually linked to the Army Family for as long as they desire.

Military OneSource

www.militaryonesource.com

A free service provided by the Department of Defense for Active-Duty, Guard, and Reserve service members and their families.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

www.taps.org

An organization specializing in military bereavement. Offers military families 24/7 support, crisis intervention, and grief resources. Also run the National Military Survivor Seminars and Good Grief Camps for adults and children.

Gold Star Wives of America

www.goldstarwives.org

An organization of military widows and widowers that provides support to military survivors.

National Military Family Association

www.militaryfamily.org

NMFA's website provides military families with a basic understanding of what benefits are available to survivors and procedures to access those benefits.

US Department of Veterans Affairs: Survivors

www.vba.va.gov/survivors

VA administers a variety of benefits and services that provide financial and other forms of assistance to survivors.

Helping **MILITARY CHILDREN** Handle Loss

Helping Children Handle Loss: This guidebook is meant to help parents and caregivers support children as they try to cope with the loss of a loved one. Our goal is to help you recognize how children experience loss, how they grieve, and how they may react in this most difficult of times. We will also show you ways to help bereaved children understand what they are going through so that they can better cope, suggest ways that you can help them accommodate (or learn to live with) their loss, and give you tips to commemorate, honor, and remember their loved one.

The Comfort Crew creates resources that support and comfort military children and their families when challenged by adversity.