

Taking Care of You!

SUPPORT FOR KIDS OF INJURED HEROES



Family Guidebook





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Table of Contents

A Note from Trevor	4
Transition to Home Life	5
Talking to Your Children	7
How a Loved One's Injury Affects Children.....	10
Helping Children Cope	14
Preparing Your Children for the Hospital Visit.....	17
Taking Care Of Yourself	20
Notes	22
More Resources	24

A Note From Trevor...

This guidebook was created to help support families who have an injured loved one. It provides steps and activities to help children learn how to cope with both physical and emotional injuries. A good starting place is the DVD, Taking Care of You! The DVD covers many issues related to injuries, with characters and a story children can relate to. Also included is the resiliency journal, which provides answers to some common questions children may ask after someone close to them is injured. The journal gives kids a place to work through things they may not be ready to talk about.

We trust that this guidebook will answer many questions you might have, and we hope it will give you the words and strength you need to support children during this tough time.

We have met with many families at various stages of healing from their injuries. They have shared aspects of their long and challenging journey. We share their insights so that it might bring comfort to you on your journey.

I am touched by the pain and hardships these children are going through, and I am inspired by the families who have found hope during this difficult time. I am very proud and honored to be able to work with military children, and I am happy to share what I have learned with you. With that in mind, I believe that the contents of this guidebook will be extremely helpful to you as you provide love and support to kids of injured heroes.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Trevor Romain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Trevor" on the top line and "Romain" on the bottom line.

Transition to Home Life

The emotional cycle of deployment is challenging under the best of circumstances. Each stage of deployment carries with it a whole range of issues that military families must face, from the building stress of pre-deployment, to the constant worry while your loved one is deployed, to the changes when they return.

But when your loved one is injured, the issues and challenges can feel overwhelming. *When will you see your loved one? What can you do to help? When will they come home? How do you tell your children?* A lot will depend on the type of injury your loved one sustained. Some may come home right away. Others may need treatment at a hospital nearby or may require special treatment at a hospital far away.

Service members can experience many types of injuries. They can have trauma that affects them emotionally, like nightmares or struggles with difficult memories. Service members can look fine but feel depressed, have PTSD, or have a Traumatic Brain Injury. Some service members may have physical injuries, like scars, burns, or missing limbs. And service members might have a mix of emotional trauma and physical injuries.

Any of these injuries can have a profound effect on military families, especially children. A child's sense of security and safety comes primarily from their connection to their caregivers, stability at home, and having a consistent routine. These can be hard to maintain during deployment, but are even more challenging when your loved one is emotionally or physically injured. A child will not only worry about who will take care of them, but a loved one's injury can make them worry about their own safety. While every child is different, understanding how your children may react to a loved one's injuries and knowing some of their concerns is a good way help them cope. With support, children can be strong, dedicated, and resilient.

THIS GUIDEBOOK WILL COVER:

- How to talk with your children about injuries
- How children react to a having an injured parent
- How to help children cope
- How injuries affects families

How to Use this Guidebook

The goal of this guidebook is to support parents and caregivers in helping their children cope with the injuries of a loved one. Every situation is unique, but there are some common ways children react and there are ways you can prepare your children for the challenges ahead. While not everyone will experience the stress of an injured loved one in the same way, a good first step is to be flexible and accept that things will change.

When you need
a little extra love
from your parent
just ask for it.

— High School Student,
Ramstein Air Base



Talking to Your Children

What am I going to do? What's the right way to tell the kids? It's normal to feel helpless, scared, and worried about your loved one and your family. While it's a good idea to tell your children as soon as you can, give yourself time to process the news first so that you can be there for your children and answer any questions they may have. Talking with them and being open to their questions is a good way to comfort them and make them feel safe.

There will be a lot of questions about the injury, about the treatment, about their loved one's condition. It's okay to not know all the answers. Be honest and listen to what your children ask. No matter their age, when a loved one is hurt, especially if it's a parent, a child's sense of security and safety are threatened. Your children will look to you for reassurance.

- At first, you may not be able to devote enough time to supporting your children. Try to have family members or close friends there to explain what happened and answer questions.
- Things are going to be hectic. Your primary concern will be caring for your loved one. Make a plan for who will watch your children, how they can reach you, and when you'll be home. Share it with your children.
- Expect younger children to ask the same questions and repeat the same details over and over. Repetition is their way of understanding what happened.
- Writing or drawing in a journal can give children a safe place to work through their feelings when they might not be ready to talk.
- Share age appropriate information with your children about the injury. Use simple, clear language. Give details that can help a child understand the injury and how it may affect their loved one.

Talking Tips for Infants and Toddlers

- Even very young children can sense when something is wrong. Reassure them with hugs and extra affection.
- Younger children may not understand what has happened. Telling them you love them will reassure them that they will be cared for.
- A child's body language can say a lot about their emotions. Hanging their head or slouching could mean they need extra hugs.
- Simple games like peek-a-boo teach children that a loved one can go away and come back again.

Talking Tips for Preschoolers

- Giving them too much information can be overwhelming. Keep it as simple as possible. Give them short explanations, avoid technical words, and help them understand what has happened. Using a doll or diagram of the human body can be a very helpful tool to explain the injury.
- Children use play and games to express themselves and work through their feelings. Play can also help them release stress and keep them from feeling overwhelmed.
- Using terms like "sick" or "not feeling well" may confuse children with normal sickness or something they could "catch." Be specific when you can.
- Doodles and pictures can say a lot. Preschoolers use art and drawings to express their feelings. Have them share what they've made and give them a chance to talk about what they are feeling.

Talking Tips for School-Age Children

- School-age kids are old enough to understand what has happened. They are also old enough to imagine things possibly being worse than they are. Giving them appropriate details and information can reduce their anxiety and uncertainty.
- Some may feel more comfortable expressing themselves by writing or through art than by talking.
- Yelling in a pillow, popping bubble wrap, or exercise can help express or release fear, frustration, and anger.

Children can sometimes bottle up their emotions. Try to make sure they have someone to talk to.

Drawing and journaling are good ways to release their pent-up emotions.

- Help them share what they are feeling. Give them words to express themselves, like “sad,” “afraid,” or “feeling worried.”

Talking Tips for Adolescents

- Teens may not want to talk right way. Give them time to process their feelings. Let them know you are ready to talk whenever they are.
- Older kids will want to feel useful. If possible, including teens in conversations about their loved one can help them feel in control.
- Getting a teen to open up can be difficult. Asking them how they are doing may just get you an “I’m fine.” Try to ask open ended questions like, “How are you able to focus on your homework?” or “What do you do to cheer yourself up?”



How a Loved One's Injury Affects Children

The combat injuries and trauma of a service member affects the whole family. It influences your emotional wellbeing and your sense of security. For children, the affects can be deeper still. They may not fully understand how the injury will impact their life and change their loved one. They may blame themselves for their loved one's negative moods and behavior, or think their loved one doesn't care about them. Children may grieve for the way their parent was before and may even resent the changes the injury has had on their life. They will worry about their own safety as well as yours and other family members and will need reassurance that they will be taken care of.

Be available
and encourage kids
to let you know if they
have questions or
need a hug.



How Children React to Physical Injuries

For children, physical injuries, like scars, burns, or amputation, can be shocking at first. They will worry that their loved one won't be able to take care of them, play with them, or do the same things they did before they were injured.

Some children will want to see the injury, look under bandages or at scars, while others will shy away. Both responses are healthy and normal. When there is an option, give your child a choice and to let them know that either looking or not looking is okay.

Using a picture, drawing, or a doll to explain the injury can help it prepare them for seeing their loved one. Talk with your kids about where is okay to touch. You can say, "Mommy can't hug you right now but she can squeeze your hand and you can kiss her cheek."

Common Reactions in Infants and Toddlers

- Increased clinginess
- Increased aggressive behavior, crying, and tantrums
- Fear of separation from loved ones

Common Reactions in Preschoolers

- Returning to younger behaviors (thumb-sucking, bed-wetting)
- Changes in eating or sleeping behavior
- Emotional outbursts and repeated questions about the injury
- Helplessness, nightmares, and confusion

Common Reactions in School-Age Children

- Acting out, angry outbursts
- Increased anxiety and cries for attention
- Guilt, embarrassment, withdrawal, won't open up
- Fear and concern about someone else being injured
- Trouble sleeping, headaches, and safety concerns

Common Reactions in Adolescents

- Same reactions as school-age children
- More withdrawn, hiding their feelings
- Social anxiety, embarrassment about the injured parent
- Trouble concentrating and having issues at school
- Negative, risk-taking behavior

Children's Reaction to Injuries They Can't See

Because their loved one won't *look* injured, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Traumatic Brain Injury may be confusing for children. But even young children understand there can be changes inside the body that can't be seen on the outside. X-Ray, MRI, CT scans, or even a drawing can help explain the injury to children. Keep in mind that it may take them time to understand what their loved one is dealing with and how they have changed.

How PTSD Affects Service Members

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a treatable anxiety disorder that can occur after seeing or experiencing a traumatic event. It is common for service members who have PTSD to re-experience the traumatic event through unwanted memories and nightmares. They will

About one in three of the men and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD.

also avoid reminders of war, to the point where they may seem numb, unhappy, and even detached from you and the family. They may also be easily upset, angry, and have trouble sleeping and staying asleep.

How TBI affects service members

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) occurs from a serious impact causing a physical injury to the brain, which can result in noticeable changes in personality. It is common for service members who have experienced a TBI to have headaches, blurred vision, dizziness, and even nausea. They may have trouble making decisions and become forgetful. Service members may find even simple tasks difficult and have problems concentrating, which can lead to them feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and even withdrawn from their family.

How PTSD and TBI affect children:

- To children, a loved one with PTSD or TBI may not look injured. Children may be confused because they can't "see" where their loved one is hurt.
- When an injured parent acts out because of their injury, younger children may not see it as a symptom but blame themselves or think they have done something wrong.
- Children may confuse their loved one's numbness and withdrawal as not loving or caring about them.
- Some children may develop similar symptoms as their loved one, either as a way to connect with them or as a stress reaction to seeing their parent's difficulties.

Helping Children Understand Parental PTSD and TBI

Communication is vital to helping your children understand what their loved one is dealing with. As they try to understand, they'll need patience, time, and reassurance. Be ready to give extra hugs and comfort. Make yourself available to them and let them know you are there for them when they need to talk.

A Normal Trauma Response vs. PTSD

When someone experiences a serious shock or trauma, it's normal to feel upset, numb, anxious, and scared. They might have many of the same symptoms as PTSD. These are usually short lived and occur soon after the event. But with PTSD, as time goes by, instead of getting better, they might develop new reactions months after the event, be stuck feeling the same symptoms, or even start to feel worse.

Helping Children Cope

Be prepared to feel a lot of conflicting emotions when your service member returns. The joy and happiness at seeing them again may be tempered if they have trouble adjusting to being home. And if they are injured, their return will bring with it worry and concern over their health and wellbeing. Sometimes, their injury will require them to be hospitalized for treatment before they can come home. The details of the injury and the decisions you have to make about their care can be extremely stressful.

It may not be possible
to keep all the old
routines, so build new
routines if necessary.

you may not be able to devote as much time to them as you would like or they may need.

For your children, it can be overwhelming. Children need stability and routine, especially when they are dealing with stress and anxiety. They look to you for comfort as well as guidance on how to act and feel. Keep in mind that you in the beginning,

- Learn as much as possible about the injury, the treatment, and what to expect, not only for yourself and your loved one, but also to answer your children's questions and explain what is going on.
- Lean on family and friends for support. Accept offers of help. Choose a family member or trusted adult your kids can go to when you are not available. Having a plan and sharing it with them will help them feel safe.
- Try to keep to routines and be predictable yourself. Normal mealtimes, bedtimes, and activities like reading a story, doing chores, or playing with friends give kids the structure they need to feel safe.
- Offer encouragement and give them hope. A reassuring hug or pat on the back, even just sitting close to them, can help when words sometimes can't.
- Not everyone copes in the same ways. For some, quiet time is helpful. Others cope best through talking and being with people. For both children and adults, it can be helpful to share what helps each person in the family.

Coping Tips for Infants and Toddlers

- Don't hide your feelings from your child. Young children learn how to cope from watching you.
- Give plenty of hugs and affection. Physical contact reassures a child and makes them feel safe.
- Try as best as you can to maintain a routine.

Coping Tips for Preschoolers

- Let them know it's still okay for them to play and have fun.
- Try to keep a routine 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.

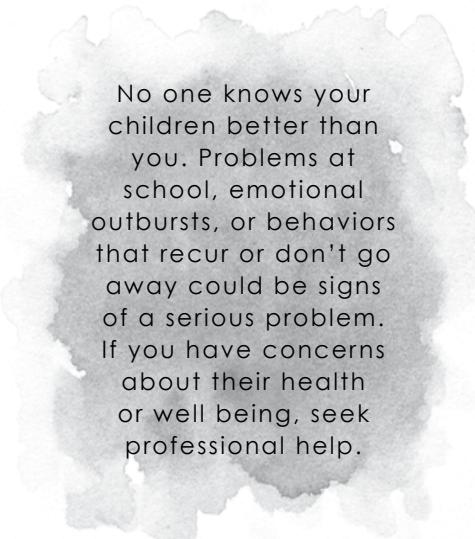


Coping Tips for School-Age Kids

- School-age kids respond to stress 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 emotions and identify negative behaviors. Give them healthy ways to express their feelings. If they are angry, let them yell into a pillow. If they are stressed, have them exercise.
- Allow them some time to be a kid. Encourage play time with friends.
- Keep in mind that some kids, especially if they are the oldest child, may want to take on more responsibility. Try to help them feel useful without being overwhelmed.

Coping Tips for Adolescents

- Teens may have an adult understanding of what is happening, but they don't have your life experience and may need help handling their emotions. Let them know you are there for them if they need to talk.
- Teens may not want to bother you with their feelings. Sharing your feelings can be an invitation for them to share with you.
- Military children, especially teens, may feel the need to "grow up" and take on more responsibility. When appropriate, include them in family discussions. Feeling needed and useful gives them a sense of control. But remember that they are still children and need your support.



No one knows your children better than you. Problems at school, emotional outbursts, or behaviors that recur or don't go away could be signs of a serious problem. If you have concerns about their health or well being, seek professional help.

Preparing Your Children for the Hospital Visit

For most children, hospitals are full of the unknown and unfamiliar, and can be a frightening place. If your loved one is being cared for in a hospital, it is important to help your children cope with any anxiety and fears they may have. While visiting the hospital can be stressful, seeing you and the kids and feeling your support can be an important part of your loved one's healing process.

- Deciding when to bring your children to the hospital can be difficult. You may want to focus on your loved one's care without distractions, or you may need time to prepare your children for the hospital. Discuss it with your loved one and the medical staff. It's okay if you decide to wait. Be sure to explain your decision as best you can. "Daddy is in the hospital but needs some time to get better before he's ready for a visit."
- When you decide to bring them, give children plenty of reassurance that it is okay for them to be there. Giving kids something to do or a task, like making a sign or carrying a gift, can make them feel more comfortable.
- Be prepared to give your children more attention, especially younger ones. Their concerns may not seem logical. They may think they can "catch" the injury from their parent, or that their parent is being punished for doing something bad.
- For younger children, who might become impatient or upset, it's good to plan shorter visits or have an adult ready to take them for a walk to the cafeteria or around the hospital.

The Sights and Sounds of the Hospital

Hospitals can be a scary place for children. An important part of preparing them for a visit is describing the hospital as much as possible. From strange medical equipment to medical staff and other patients, knowing what to expect will help them feel in control.

Share a photo of your loved one in the hospital to help prepare your kids for what they will see and answer any questions they may have.

There are a lot of things in a hospital that children are not used to seeing. Before their first visit, it can help to describe what they will see, hear, and even smell. It will give them a chance to ask you questions and lower their anxiety when they get there.

- Especially important is telling kids about their loved one. Let them know how they look, if they have any significant differences from the last time the kids saw them, and remind them what their loved one can and can't do. "Dad has a bandage on his head, but he still loves you."
- Plan for time after hospital visits to talk to your children. This can give them a chance to ask you any questions about what they saw or heard. It can also give you a chance to help them express any fears they might have.
- Familiar things from home can help younger children feel more comfortable in new places. With all the new and strange things to see, family photos, a homemade sign, and a favorite toy or pillow can help your children feel more at ease.



Coping with Extended Recovery

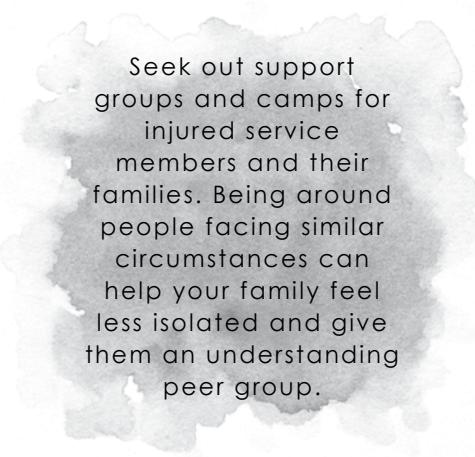
Some serious injuries may require specialized treatment at a hospital or facility in another city or another state. This can cause even more stress on the family. Not only do you have to cope with concern over your injured loved one, but now you have to arrange travel and childcare, as well as take care of normal household issues. And for children, an extended recovery can create a whole new set of challenges.

- Caring for your injured loved one can be a full-time job. It can be hard to focus on your children's needs as well. Lean on family, friends, and assistance from the military. Having other adults your children can go to will give them comfort and allow you to concentrate on your injured loved one.
- A long recovery can strain the connection between children and their injured loved one. When possible, pictures, phone calls, and notes are a good way to keep them connected. If you need to be away as well, try to send letters, emails, and touch base on the phone as much as you are able.
- Communication is key. Giving children updates on their loved one's condition can also help them deal with their stress. Children have strong imaginations. Not knowing can lead them to imagine things are worse than they are. Even saying "nothing has changed" can be better than no news at all.
- If travel is involved, children will not only have to deal with separation from their injured loved one, but may now be without their remaining caregiver. Make a plan and include your children. Let them know what they can expect and who will take care of them while you are away.
- Some injuries require a temporary move. Kids will miss their home and the support of their friends. Email and cell phones can make it easy for them to stay in touch.

Taking Care of You!

With caring for your service member, taking care of your children, and maintaining your home, it's easy to get lost in the responsibilities and not take care of yourself. It's normal to feel overwhelmed. And while it can be hard to step away, taking care of you is extremely important. Don't feel guilty when you need time to recharge. If you don't take care of yourself, it's harder to help your family cope.

- Ask for support from family and friends. The more help you have, the more time you'll have to focus on what you need.
- Identify what helps you cope. Exercise, watch a movie, be with friends. Even if it's only for a short time, make it a part of your routine. Do things that make you happy or relieve stress.
- Send a note along with your child to school. Teachers can be there for your kids while they are at school, providing another layer of support. They can also let you know if there are any problems.
- The military has services in place for families. Keep those numbers on hand in case you need them.
- Make a plan for emergencies. Decide who will pick up the kids from school, who can take care of them and for how long. Share your plan with your children and family members.
- Stress can cause you to say and do things you may not mean. Especially with children, if you raise your voice, blame them, or say something you don't mean, it is important to explain your actions. Tell them it's not their fault, apologize, and talk to them about why you are feeling stress.



Seek out support groups and camps for injured service members and their families. Being around people facing similar circumstances can help your family feel less isolated and give them an understanding peer group.

Conclusion

As a military family, you know all the unique challenges you have to face. But none can be harder than helping your loved one cope with an injury. Every family is different, and each family member will respond in their own way. Working together as a family, understanding how to be there for them, knowing when to ask for help, and learning ways to cope during this challenging time can make you and your family more resilient and make family bonds stronger.



More Resources

The Comfort Crew for Military Kids
www.ComfortCrew.org

USO
www.uso.org

USO lifts the spirits of America's troops and their families. The USO is dedicated to helping in the rehabilitation and reintegration of our troops as they and their families navigate the road to recovery, with Warrior and Family Care Centers providing the ultimate rest and relaxation areas for our wounded, along with their families and caregivers, while they recover.

Wonders and Worries
www.wondersandworries.org
Offers support for children when a member of the family is struggling with chronic illness.

Zero To Three
www.zerotothree.org
ZERO TO THREE is proud to support military families. We work to increase awareness and collaboration throughout the military community so that parents and professionals can more effectively care for very young children and their families.

Military OneSource
www.MilitaryOneSource.com
This free 24-hour service is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members (regardless of activation status) and their families.

The Fisher House™ Program
www.fisherhouse.org
Because members of the military and their families are stationed worldwide and must often travel great distances for specialized medical care, Fisher House Foundation donates "comfort homes," built on the grounds of major military and VA medical centers.

More Resources, (cont'd.)

Yellow Ribbon Fund

www.yellowribbonfund.com

Assisting Injured Service Members and their Families.

F.O.C.U.S

www.focusproject.org

FOCUS Project addresses concerns related to parental combat operational stress injuries and combat-related physical injuries by providing state-of-the-art family resiliency services to military children and families.

Hope for the Warriors

www.hopeforthewarriors.org

Hope for the Warriors enhances the quality of life for post-9/11 service members, their families, and families of the fallen who have sustained physical and psychological wounds in the line of duty.

The Semper Fi Fund

semperfifund.org

Financial, emotional, and tiered support is available to qualifying injured and critically ill post 9/11 Marines, Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and reservists.

National Military Family Association

www.militaryfamily.org

NMFA's website provides military families with a basic understanding of the overall process that will take place if their service member is wounded, ill, or injured (WII) in the line of duty. The Operation Purple Healing Adventures program celebrates rediscovering family-fun and togetherness after an injury.

Operation Homefront

www.operationhomefront.net

Operation Homefront provides financial and other direct services to alleviate a military family's or individual's actual/complete emergency financial burden, as well as counseling and/or recovery support.

Taking Care of You!

SUPPORT FOR KIDS OF INJURED HEROES

Supporting Children of Injured Heroes: This guidebook is meant to help military families understand the challenges children face when a loved one is injured. The information in this guidebook can be a good starting point to discover ways for your family to cope during this challenging time. Our goal is to help you learn what to expect and what difficulties children may face so that you can come together and grow stronger as a family.

The Comfort Crew for Military Kids is a nonprofit organization that creates resources to support and comfort military children and their families.