



Invisible Children's Project

Helping Children Cope: Deployment, War, and Reunions

Children develop strengths and resilience in the face of adversity. However, children can be invisible victims when military moms and dads are sent to fight in a war. The stress of a parent leaving home can evoke physical and behavior problems. Examples include immature behavior such as bed-wetting and tantrums. Physical symptoms can include high blood pressure, headaches, stomach aches, or eating problems. Psychological problems can include depression, aggression, anger, difficulty sleeping, and anxiety. When there is more than one deployment, families have a more difficult time recovering from the absence of a parent.

For many children, once a parent leaves for war, the focus often is on the parent's safety rather than on normal childhood activities. Also, the rate of child abuse and neglect in military families increases when a parent leaves home for a war zone. The parent caring for the children now acts as a single parent. The parent at home must provide physical and emotional support for the children, and also faces the chance that his or her spouse might not return, or may return but be fundamentally changed by the war.

A parent coming home rarely solves all family problems. Being gone at war changes relationships in unexpected ways. Children report that returning parents can be tougher, less engaging, depressed, or angry. Children are often confused and scared by the changes in their parent. Children might see their parents show symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Examples of symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, irritability, lack of affect, estrangement, hypervigilance, and extreme startle responses. Research shows that children of all ages may mimic PTSD symptoms. A parent's physical or mental disability can lead to further stress for the family.

After a parent returns, children may be happy and angry at the same time. Or they may exhibit behavior problems. Or they may be anxious and not trust that their parent is home to stay. Older children who took on adult responsibilities may not want to give up their roles. Or they may have to continue some part of an adult role if their parent is physically or mentally challenged. Children often are forgotten and need support and encouragement.

Tips for Parents

1. Listen and let your children talk about their fears and feelings.

Allow your children to express their feelings about war and their parent being sent to war. Use books and art to help your child communicate.

2. Help your child understand differences among people without labeling another person as "bad."

Talk about "bad actions" rather than "bad people." Discuss differences and ways to resolve conflicts respectfully.

3. Provide a home that is emotionally safe for your child.

Allow for time and space to spend time together. Be available for your child when possible.

4. Limit the amount of time your child spends watching TV or on the internet to find news of the war.

Television and internet access should be in a common area in the house and not in children's bedrooms. Pre-school and elementary children are harmed by exposure to frightening coverage, so turn your television off when the news is on, or pre-screen news and avoid violence. If your children are exposed to war coverage, ask them what they saw and how they felt. Watch fun programs on television, and play together.

5. Recognize when your child is stressed by the situation and overreacts to normal daily events.

For example, your child may kick a chair at the dinner table, or be upset at missing a spelling word. When you see your children very upset, ask them about how they feel and help them talk. Don't minimize their feelings.

6. Keep a routine and schedule to help create safety and predictability.

7. Keep connections going with the deployed parent.

Help your child communicate with their deployed parent, for example, scrapbooking, email, web casts, letters, care packages and singing or making-up songs.

8. Remind your children of their strengths and to ask for help when it is needed.

Examples of what you might say: You were so helpful with the dishes. You worked hard on your homework. You're so good with computers. You look really upset – I'm here to help you. Do you need help?

9. Involve your child in sports, clubs, and friendships with peers who understand your child's experience.

10. Take good care of yourself and develop a healthy support system.

Take a walk, go to a movie. Get a break from taking care of your children. Barter child care or babysitting.

Resources

Helping Our Heroes at Home - <http://www.sesameworkshop.org/initiatives/emotion/tlc> Information to ease homecoming - www.apa.org/releases/homecoming.html

Articles, including resiliency in a time of war - <http://apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/>

Books on Veteran Affairs - <http://www.quickseries.com/government/government.asp>

Military resources - www.militaryonesource.com (1-800-342-9647. 24-hours)

Information on invisible wounds - www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=642539

Military child resources - <http://www.militarychild.org/>

Suicide Prevention Lifeline www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org (1-800-273-8255)

Mental health & mental retardation community services list -

http://www.txcouncil.com/addresses_and_websites.aspx

Texas Vet Centers - <http://www1.va.gov/directory/guide/state.asp?State=TX&dnum=ALL>

National Military Family Association - <http://www.nmfa.org/site/PageServer>

Operation Purple summer camps for children of military families -

http://www.nmfa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=op_default?&from www.operationpurple.org

Free **Videos** for mid & high school kids of deployed parents. They can be watched here:

<http://www.aap.org/sections/uniformedservices/deployment/index.html>

Book for teens: "Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma" www.seedsofhopebooks.com