

Honoring Our Babies & Toddlers

Supporting young children affected by
A MILITARY PARENT'S DEATH

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



COMING TOGETHER AROUND MILITARY FAMILIES®



When a Military Parent of a Baby or Toddler Dies

I want my children to learn that their success and happiness is determined by them, not by their loss. —A mother

Though your baby or toddler can't understand the details of her parent's death or understand what it means to die, she is aware something is happening. After notification, she may notice differences—in her daily routine, in your voice, and in the expression on your face. These changes can leave her feeling uncertain or insecure.

At the same, she is making new discoveries about herself, other people, and objects wherever she is and whatever she is doing—eating a banana, climbing in the park, or proudly helping you sort the socks in the laundry basket.

She looks to you for comfort and to help her understand and cope with her feelings. In this brochure, we will look at six steps you can take to support your child over the days, weeks, and years:

- Talk with your child about death.
- Ask yourself, “What is my child’s behavior telling me?” and “What can I say or do to support her?”
- Take advantage of everyday moments to comfort your child and nurture connections.
- Care for yourself.
- Explore and use a few key resources. (A list will be included later.)
- Share your child’s pleasure in everyday moments.

Some of what you read here you may already know and do. Some ideas may be new. We invite you to take one or two tips and try them.

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Talk With Your Child About Death

I tell my kids, “Your dad wanted nothing more than to come home from Iraq.”
—A mother

It’s OK for my kids to see me sad. —A mother

Telling your child about the death of her parent is the beginning of a conversation that will evolve over the years as your child grows older. Your child doesn’t need you to come up with the perfect words. He needs you to be you and to know he can count on you.

Because young children think concretely it is best to use truthful, gentle, clear and simple language: “Daddy got hurt badly and cannot breathe or move. He would be with you if he could.” Saying, “He went to sleep” or “we lost him” can be confused with everyday experiences and may frighten a child.

Don’t worry if you cry. Sometimes in an effort to protect their children—and themselves—from the pain, parents try to act as if everything is OK. A death is a loss so big there is bound to be pain. Trying to cover your feelings can confuse or upset your child who is remarkably tuned into you and your emotions. Letting your child see you cry and explaining how you feel gives your child permission to express the wide range of feelings that are part of grief and mourning.



Take Advantage of Everyday Moments to Comfort Your Child and Nurture Connections

Everyday moments are an opportunity to comfort your child and nurture connections.

You help your baby relax—and you too—when you:

- *Rock together.* Moving back and forth, slowly, gently, is calming.
- *Sing her a song.* Don’t worry if you can’t carry a tune. Your child loves hearing your voice.
- *Give your child a gentle massage—if she enjoys it.* Using your fingertips or palm, gently move from head to toe talking softly to her.
- *Keep her comfort items or “lovey” nearby in case she wants them.* Her pacifier, favorite blanket, or stuffed toy are soothing.

I want the people in my kids’ lives to know the situation so they can be supportive. That depends on me telling them. —A mother

You help your child feel safe and secure when you:

- *Offer extra hugs, kisses, and cuddles.* You will feel better too.
- *Stick to your daily routines the best you can.* Knowing what to expect will help your child feel more in control.
- *Say “goodbye” when leaving, even for a short time. Remind your child you will return like you always do.* This builds trust. Don’t try to “sneak away” even if your child cries.
- *Assure your child someone will take good care of her when you are apart.* “When I go to work, Shelley will be here with you.”
- *Read the same book or tell the same story—again.* Knowing what is coming next is comforting.
- *Talk with your child about what she may be feeling.* Give her words to validate her feelings and to show her feelings can be shared. “You look like you are angry.”
- *Explain your situation to other adults in your child’s life such as your pediatrician or child care provider so they can be supportive.* “I want you to know we are a survivor family. My wife was killed in Afghanistan last year. I’m telling you so that if you have a question or concern about my child’s behavior, we can discuss it.”
- *Create “moments of normalcy.”* Play hide and seek, watch a movie, look at family photos. These are familiar, reassuring activities.

Reading to Your Children

This list includes a few suggestions of books to share with your young children. Though a baby or toddler may not understand every word at first, it is comforting snuggle with you, look at pictures, and hear your voice. Choose children's books that reflect your family's beliefs. They may offer language to use with your child during times when life is difficult.



On Grief and Loss:

These books can help you talk with your child about what your child is feeling and the loss your family has experienced.

Note: These books are not written specifically for infants or toddlers. You know your child best and can decide when it feels right to introduce them. In addition, these books might be useful in supporting older siblings through their grief experiences:

Goodbye Mousie by Robie H. Harris. A story about a little boy coming to terms with the fact that his pet mouse has died with his father's support. It explores the child's emotions from the time he wakes up to find his mouse "asleep" to Mousie's burial. (Aladdin, 2004)

I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas. This book describes simply and gently what happens when someone dies. It explains that death is a natural part of life. (Published by Barron's Educational Series, 2001)

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst. A story about the tie of love that reaches from heart to heart whether the people you love are together or apart. (Published by DeVorss & Company, 2000).

On Family Connections:

These books can help you reassure your child about your presence and love.

Guess How Much I Love You by Sam McBratney. A soothing tale of Little Nutbrown Hare who tries to think of all the different ways he can to tell his dad how much he loves him as he puts off bedtime just a little longer. (Published by Candlewick, 1996)

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown. In an imaginary game of chase, a little bunny takes different forms—a fish, a crocus, a rock. No matter where he goes, his mother finds him. (Published by Harper Collins, 2005)

What Mommys Do Best/What Daddies Do Best by Laura Numeroff. This flip book shows animal mothers on one side and fathers on the other doing the same loving activities that include baking a birthday cake and holding you when you feel sad. Children may enjoy drawing and writing their own versions. (Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1998)

You help build your child's confidence she can manage when you:

- **Invite your child to join in daily routines.** Your baby will feel proud to hold her clean diaper when you are changing her. Your toddler or 2-year-old will enjoy a "real" job like using the feather duster or helping you scrub the potatoes for dinner.
- **Give her realistic choices:** "Do you want to wear your yellow shirt or the ones with stripes?"
- **Help your child succeed.** For example, when your baby's rattle rolls away, move it closer so she can reach it.
- **Share your child's delight in a new accomplishment.** "You gave that ball a giant kick."
- **Help your child see they continue to learn and grow and that there are people who will help her.** "This is your Harley that your dad willed to you. Your uncle can help you learn to ride it when you get older."

The other night after a challenging day, I made pancakes and bacon for dinner. It was my husband's favorite thing: breakfast for dinner. We made it on his birthday for dinner too. —A mother

Some days are easier than others, and on those difficult days it may be challenging to pull out a book to read with your child or to even look at photographs. But these activities don't need to happen everyday. When you and your child are ready, you can and will be able to build memories and become stronger together. Below are some suggestions.

You nurture connections when you:

- **Share photographs** of the parent who has died and photos of all of you together, if they exist. Display them around the house. Make a photo album. Put a collection of contact-paper photos in a basket. That way a toddler can choose one to carry in her pocket if she likes.
- **Tell family stories**—about little and big things. Young children will love to hear tiny details like, "You and Daddy would sit in the rocking chair. He held you close and say, "I love you" as you rocked back and forth every night before you went to sleep." Or "Mommy always put strawberry jelly on your toast, then cut your toast into four pieces." Or "Mommy used to call you from Afghanistan and brought this toy camel home for you."
- **Appreciate that storytelling is one way children create a protective**

relationship with a parent—even if the story is about an event that never happened. For example, when a 2-year old joins her older brother in telling about how she and her mommy went to the farm and milked the cows even though she was an infant at the time.

- *Sing the songs and read the books you enjoyed together.* Or make up new ones that include the parent who has died.
- *Negotiate Mother’s and Father’s Day with your child’s teacher.* One mother explains, “If my child wants to make a Father’s Day card or gift, I tell her teacher it is fine. Then later, we can take it to his grave.”

If your child has never met their parent, build connections through stories such as: “Daddy used to sing to you when you were in my belly.” Or “Daddy put the picture I sent him of you in my belly in the inside of his helmet where he could see you everyday.” Photos of you when you were expecting gives your child something to hold on to over the years.



Ask Yourself, “What Is My Child’s Behavior Telling Me? What Can I Say and Do to Support Her?”

Though your child may not have the words to tell you what she feels and needs, her behavior can help you understand what she is experiencing. The chart below in a child’s words can help you see your child’s perspective. It also offers examples of supportive responses.

When We First Got the News:		
When I...	I may be saying...	How you can support me
Cry, fuss, cling, withdraw, and get quiet and still	I know something is going on. And when you, my home base, are so upset and distracted, I may feel insecure and afraid.	Tell me simply and honestly about what is happening. “We just learned Mommy died. It makes me sad and I’m crying.”
	My routine is upset. I’m confused. I may be hungry or tired.	Try to keep my routine the same. Even part of it. It helps me feel safe when I know what to expect. Be sure I have my “lovey” (my special blanket or stuffed animal). Be sure there is someone to feed me and offer me the chance to sleep—in my crib, in my stroller, or in the car.

During the Memorial Service:		
When I...	I may be saying...	How you can support me
Fuss or whine	I need a break.	Have someone I know and trust there who can focus on me—give me a bottle or snack, rock me, walk with me, play with me.
Stare, look wide-eyed, cling, go back to sucking my thumb	I’m confused; I’m getting overwhelmed.	Tell me simply and honestly about what is happening. “We are all saying goodbye to Daddy.”

*It's been two years. Sometimes my daughter says, "Hi. I'm _____ and my Dad is dead."
When other kids talk about their fathers, she tells a family story about her Dad. She's talking about what she knows.*

Day by day:

When I...	I may be saying...	How you can support me
Cry, protest, hit, cling, withdraw	I'm afraid. My world is feeling out of control.	<p>Reassure me that I am safe and you will keep me safe. "Mommy's body had a giant boo-boo and couldn't get better. Your body has a little boo-boo and we can fix it."</p> <p>Give me words for what I may be feeling. Offer me comfort. "I know you are sad Daddy isn't coming home. Should we sit in the rocking chair and look at these pictures of Daddy together?"</p> <p>Give me safe and healthy ways to show my feelings. Make up an "angry" dance. Give me lots of time outdoors to move and do. Offer me the chance to play with materials I can shape, pound, splash, and pretend with: playdough, water and sand, puppets, dolls.</p> <p>Reassure me that what happened isn't my fault.</p> <p>Take care of yourself. I need you.</p>
Insist that Mommy will be home soon	It's hard to understand Mommy will never come home again. I don't want to know that Mommy will never come home again. Maybe if I insist it isn't true, she will come back.	Try to help me sort through my feelings. "I know you want Mommy to come back. You miss her so much." Gently and honestly remind me that Mommy has died, which means she isn't coming home. "It's sad she isn't coming home because she died." Remind me how much she loved me and that she didn't choose to die and leave me.
Have nightmares or develop new fears	I'm unsure, afraid, my life feels out of control.	Reassure me you will keep me safe. Comfort me.

When I...	I may be saying...	How you can support me
Go back to younger behaviors—cry for my bottle, suck my thumb, want to be carried everywhere, wet my pants	I'm having a difficult time here. It's hard to hold everything together.	<p>Expect this. Try to understand. If you feel worried, talk with a professional who know about babies and toddlers—my doctor, an early childhood professional, and/or a counselor.</p> <p>Be patient with me. As you reassure me, I will adjust to this change over time.</p> <p>Let me know gently what you expect. For example, remind me I know how to use the potty.</p> <p>Keep in touch with my doctor and caregiver about how things are going for me—and for you.</p>
Tell people my Daddy died. Touch a strange man's face. Tell a story about my Daddy.	I miss my Daddy.	<p>Talk with me about Daddy. Tell me a story. Play games we used to play together.</p> <p>Arrange for a male relative or friend to spend some time with us.</p> <p>If you feel concerned about what I say or do, talk with my doctor or a professional you trust.</p>
Push you away, hit or bite you or another child, break something on purpose, have temper tantrums	My feelings are more than I can control. Please set some limits for me.	<p>Set clear limits in loving, positive ways. "I know you are angry, but we don't hit each other in this family."</p> <p>Give me safe, healthy ways to express my feelings.</p> <p>Help me feel in control by helping me feel competent. Let me choose the book we are going to read. Invite me to help you scrub potatoes for supper or to set the table.</p>
Cry when I see someone in a uniform like Mommy's or Daddy's or when I don't want to look at old photos or hear stories today	It hurts me for now to be reminded of my Mommy or Daddy.	Give me words for what I might be feeling. Tell me you understand. And find us something else to do together. We can talk about Daddy when I am ready.

When I...	I may be saying...	How you can support me
Am happy, singing, busy playing	The world is an amazing place—with so much to see and do and explore and learn. And I need a break from feeling sad.	Try to join me and enjoy me.
Gaze in your eyes, smile at you, reach for you, run into your arms, give you a giant hug	I love you.	Give me a big hug too.

How can I ease my child's fears?

Young children may address their concerns through their behavior or by asking direct questions. Lieberman et. al., (2003) have identified children's common worries and ideas for how to respond:

- *Will you die too?* Your child may be worried that you may die too. You may feel vulnerable and worried about it too. Try to overcome your fears and reassure your child by saying, for example, "I will not die for a long time, I'll be right here with you,"
- *Will I die also?* Young children need to be reassured that they will not die too. "You are healthy and strong. I'll take good care of you."
- *What will happen to me?* You help your child feel safe when reassure her the important adults in her life will be there to take care of her and give her a clear picture of her daily routine. For example, you might say, "Miss Cindy will be at child care to take care of you. After naptime, I'll pick you up just like Mommy used to."
- *Did I cause the death?* Young children may believe that their anger (e.g., at a parent being away) can kill. You can help your child learn that this is not true by explaining, "All children get angry at their parents sometimes. Being angry doesn't make someone get hurt or die. Sometimes we get angry, but we still love each other."
- *I want to die so I can be with Daddy.* You can remind your child how much you and others love her, and how much she would be missed if she died. Contact your child's doctor, an early childhood professional, and/or a counselor if you have any concerns about your child.

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Should my child attend the memorial service?

Many families take part in a memorial service with military traditions including a funeral procession, precision drill exercises, flag ceremony, and gun salute. For some young children this may be too overwhelming, noisy, or scary. Others will find it interesting and helpful. Use what you know about your child's reactions to new people, places and situations to help you decide what is best for her. If she does attend, here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- *Tell your child what to expect.* Explain that the service is a way of saying goodbye to the person who died. Saying goodbye can be sad so people may be crying. Explain that crying is OK for adults and children. It is a way people show how they feel.
- *Arrange for an adult your child knows and trusts to stay with your child during the service.* This way if your child needs a break or to leave or talk, there will be someone available.



Care for Yourself

Here are some suggestions to help you take care of yourself that other parents have found helpful:

- *“Try to take things one day at a time. It’s hard to do. Everything gets jumbled. But step-by-step you can make it.”*
- *“Have realistic expectations of yourself. Come up with an idea, try it, and if it didn’t work, try something different. What else can you do?”*
- *“Try to control what you can. Then don’t worry about the rest.”*
- *“Redefine your priorities and be aware they will shift over time. If you don’t get out your holiday cards on time, big deal.”*
- *Ask yourself, “What is making me so stressed? Is there something I can do about it?” There may be something simple you can do to make life easier.”*
- *“Respectfully advocate for yourself. Don’t just assume things will get better. If things aren’t working and you aren’t getting the support you need, keep insisting until you get it. Taking care of yourself is one of the best ways you can take care of your child.”*
- *“Accept support, even if it’s difficult to do. I’d prefer to handle things on my own. But it helps to have somebody else around—especially when you have a young child. So if people offer support, try to accept it.”*



Recognize Signs That You May Need Additional Support and Seek Treatment

It’s all so hard. —A mother

Ask yourself the following questions to identify signs you need support:*

- Am I feeling worse—or not any better—as time passes?
- Am I unable to do my job in the way I know it needs to be done?
- Is my family suffering because of the way I am acting?
- Am I drinking more alcohol than usual?
- Am I using drugs?
- Am I having trouble sleeping, or wanting to sleep too much?
- Is my child suffering because of the way I am acting?
- Am I able to enjoy my child?
- Do I get angry at my child for no reason?
- Am I being the parent I want to be?
- Am I feeling fulfilled as a parent right now?
- Can I ask for resources/support when I need it?
- Have I been dealing with any of these issues for a few weeks now?

Talk with someone you trust such as a professional counselor, your doctor, or a leader of your church, synagogue, or mosque at anytime and especially if signs persist 6 months or longer. Acknowledging that you need support may be difficult, yet it is one of the most important steps in caring for your child.

**Based on “Getting the Help You Need to Recover Your Emotional Health”*

This article is provided to Service members and their families as part of the Military OneSource program, which offers information and support on a wide range of family and personal issues. To access the program just go to www.militaryonesource.com or call Military OneSource today. From the United States, call 800-342-9647. From overseas, call collect 484-530-5908.

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Explore and Use Available Resources

Explore these resources and take advantage of all they have to offer you and your family:

Military OneSource is available 24/7 to connect families with services including information about child development, child care, and coping with the loss of a parent. It also includes information about child care. You can talk with a trained consultant to discuss options, resources, or referrals. Confidential counseling is available in person, by phone, and through e-mail. Go to www.militaryonesource.com or call 800-342-9647.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc. (TAPS) is a one-of-a-kind, nonprofit Veteran Service Organization offering hope, healing, comfort, and care to thousands of American armed forces families facing the death of a loved one each year. TAPS is a family that lovingly welcomes survivors young and old with the words: "We hope you will lean on us whenever you need an ear or a hug or a shoulder to lean on!" TAPS now hosts an on-line community and smaller community-based chats and socials. The organization receives absolutely *no* government funding, but through the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, all families faced with the death of one serving in the Armed Forces receive information about TAPS and our military survivor programs.

ZERO TO THREE: www.zerotothree.org offers a wealth of information on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of babies and toddlers. The military Web page supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military

Share Your Child's Pleasure in Everyday Moments

- Play "where is your tummy?" and enjoy the delight in your child's eyes.
- Share a sweet peach together and lick the juice off your lips.
- Stop to watch an ant walk across the sidewalk. Talk about where you think it is going.
- Sail a boat "across the seas" in the bathtub.
- Collect beautiful leaves or shiny pebbles in the park.
- Watch a flag blowing in the breeze and notice your hair is blowing too.

Moments such as these bring smiles, strengthen relationships, and are healing.



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Resource

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*I said to the children—Listen guys.
You had the most incredible person
for a father. That will leave a hole.
But what I can promise is that while
your lives will be different than we
had planned and dreamed, they will
be good. And that is how we can
honor Dad's memory. —A mother*

*I want my children to learn that
their success and happiness is
determined by them, not by
their loss. —A mother*

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For more information on ways to support yourself and your young children during times of military stress, go to ZERO TO THREE at www.zerotothree.org/military