

Tackling Tough Topics

An Educator's Guide *to Working with **Military Kids***



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**“ Never doubt that a small group of
thoughtful, committed (citizens)
can change the world.**

Indeed, its the only thing that ever has. ”

Margaret Mead



Helpful Resources

when working with military kids

Department of Defense Military Student:
www.militarystudent.dod.mil/

Military Child Education Coalition:
www.militarychild.org

Military Child Initiative Johns Hopkins University:
www.jhsph.edu/mci/

Military Family Research Institute:
www.cfs.purdue.edu/mfri/

Military One Source:
www.militaryonesource.com

National Military Family Association:
www.nmfa.org

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction:
www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids

Operation: Military Kids:
www.operationmilitarykids.org

The Dougy Center:
www.dougy.org

Zero to Three:
www.zerotothree.org

To learn more about "Supporting Military Kids," visit
www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

November 2008

Dear Educator -

The following publication was created to assist you in better understanding and being responsive to the unique issues facing military kids whose parents or loved ones have been or are currently deployed. It provides practical, hands-on information to help you deal with the unique "tough to talk about" topics students experience in the school setting including:

- Talking to Kids About Violence, Terrorism, and War
- Supporting Military Kids During Deployment, Homecoming, and Reunion
- Helping Kids Cope with Stress
- Understanding the Impact of Grief and Loss
- Coping with Death
- Fostering Resilience

In addition, it offers helpful skills to assist you as an educator in learning more to support the military kids you come in contact with in your classroom each and every day.

It is the hope of the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction that this publication will encourage you to continue to build healthy classroom/school environments for military kids that foster connectedness. We hope it might also help you find the specific words and actions that work for you when you are given the opportunity each day to reach out to kids. Most importantly, we trust that it will remind you what a major difference you too can make in military students lives each and every day when you reach out to connect and show you care.

Very Respectfully,

Mona M. Johnson, Director
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Four Steps to Foster Resilience

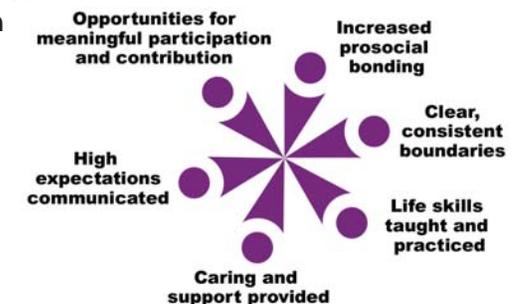
1 Always communicate the “resiliency attitude”

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

Characteristics of Resilient Kids

- ✓ Social Competence
- ✓ Problem Solving
- ✓ Autonomy
- ✓ Sense of Purpose

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



4 Maintain a “never give up!” attitude

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

Fostering Resilience in Kids

Resiliency is defined as 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, and 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.

Table of Contents

	Talking to Kids about Violence, Terrorism, and War	1–2
	Supporting Military Kids During Deployment	3–4
	Military Kids, Homecoming, and Reunion.....	5–6
	Helping Kids Cope with Stress	7–8
	Impact of Grief and Loss	9–10
	More About Dealing with Grief, Loss, and Death.....	11–13
	Fostering Resilience in Kids	14–15
	Helpful Resources	16

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 them about these very important issues.

In their day-to-day interactions, educators often 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.

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 in healthy ways 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' sharing their concerns so addressing your own personal fears may be necessary.

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

Youth behaviors when dealing with grief, loss, and death that indicate 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

To learn more about "Dealing with Grief, Loss, and Death," visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

Middle School

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.

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

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.

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

Provide facts and information – Provide kids with facts and basic information consistent with age and maturity. 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.

How Educators Can Offer Support

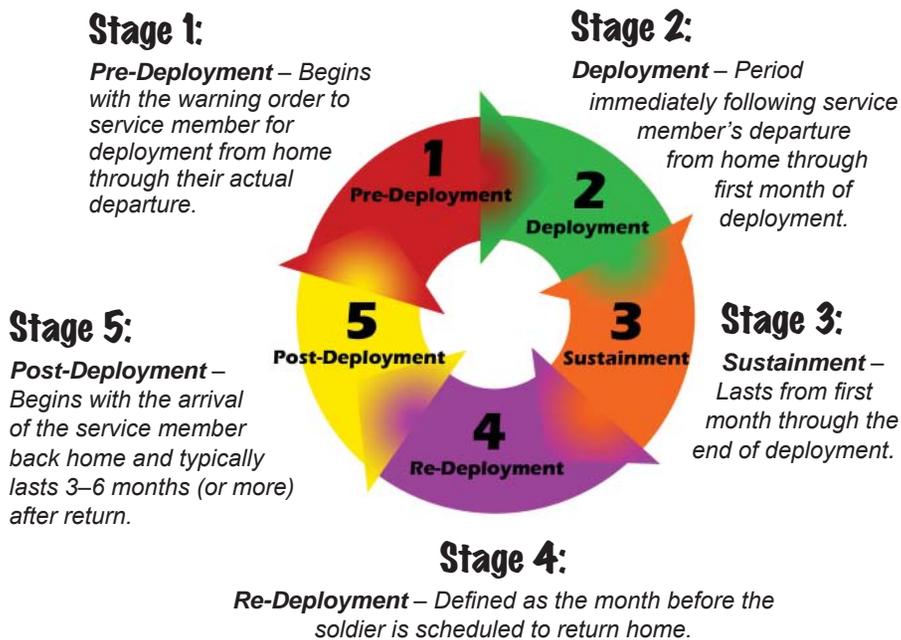
- ✓ **Listen to kids**
- ✓ **Ask questions as needed**
- ✓ **Acknowledge kids' feelings and support healthy expression**
- ✓ **Help kids to feel physically safe**
- ✓ **Help kids maintain a sense of hope by taking action**
- ✓ **Expect and respond to any significant changes in behavior**
- ✓ **Coordinate and communicate effectively between school and home**

To learn more about "Talking to Kids About Violence, Terrorism, and War," visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

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, 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 five stages of deployment are described below:



To learn more about "Supporting Military Kids During Deployment," visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

Pre-School

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.

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 School

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.

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

More about...

Dealing with Grief, Loss, and 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.

Developmental Impact and How to Help

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.

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-Deployment

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

Deployment

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

Sustainment

- 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"

Re-Deployment

- Anticipation of homecoming
- Excitement
- Apprehension
- Burst of energy/"nesting"
- Difficulty making decisions

Post-Deployment

- Soldier re-integrating into family
- Family "honeymoon" period
- Independence developed in sustainment stage redefined
- Need for "own" space
- Renegotiating routines

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

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**

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 generally 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 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)
- Readjustment (Approximately 6–8 weeks)

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.

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

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

To learn more about “The Impact of Grief and Loss,” visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

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 stress, and 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 critical is that we understand their varied responses and provide quality support to guide them through the process toward 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

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 physical, emotional, and social needs.
- ✓ **Provide structure** – Maintain predictable schedule with clear behavioral guidelines and consequences to create a safe and caring classroom. If student is distressed about the family homecoming, find appropriate time for them to share feelings, needs, excitements, 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 your own 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. All individuals and their families adjust to the changes involved with reunion at a different pace.

To learn more about “Military Kids, Homecoming and Reunion,” visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/

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.*

Infant-2½ 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.

2½-5 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.

To learn more about "Helping Kids Cope with Stress," visit www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/