When service members return with seen or unseen injuries, all family members are affected. Children may need special preparation to understand and cope with the injury. A literal explanation of what to expect when children see a physically injured parent is important. For example, the term “lost limb” may lead young children to believe that the limb will be recovered. Children may be worried that parents will not be able to play with them or they might “catch” the injury. Reassurance is a key response. It may be wise to keep a first visit brief and ask them if they want a second visit. Children may be able to draw pictures to support their parent if a face to face visit is not possible.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI), an unseen injury, has been called the “signature injury” of recent conflicts. Even mild brain injuries, 90% of TBIs, can cause memory and thinking problems and affect how a person feels. Family members are often the first to notice changes. With more severe TBIs, families may experience grief and loss because the loved one is not the same person he/she used to be. Children may think they are to blame for an injured parent’s irritability or withdrawal. When possible, protect children from outbursts. Simple, concrete explanations for this behavior may help young children.

Child care providers may be a good resource to tap into as they may see signs of distress in children before parents and schools may have links to local resources. Caregivers are often stretched thin caring for their wounded hero and providing extra support for children. Asking for help can be difficult, but caregivers also need support to cope.

Supporting Children after a Tragedy

When tragedy strikes close to home, we are left reeling, trying to understand. Children are especially vulnerable and need protection and reassurance. Here are a few tips to help children cope with tragedies:

- Give young children concrete, simple explanations of what happened. Let them know how it will affect them.
- Avoid graphic media coverage.
- Take cues from your child in discussing the event, and listen carefully to their feelings. If you feel overwhelmed with your own feelings, get some support for yourself before talking with your child.
- As much as possible, maintain daily routines.
- Be patient with children who may be more whiny or clingy than usual. Children need to feel safe and reassured. Stay close to your children, who may want physical reassurance such as hugs or cuddling before bed.
- Children, like adults, may feel helpless after a tragedy. Help them find a way to do something meaningful to help others affected by loss.

Your Baby/Toddler:

Signs of stress in infants and toddlers:
- Clingy behavior
- More crying than usual
- Disrupted sleep and eating habits

Parent Tips:

- Don’t take it personally if your little one pulls away or is shy around the returning parent. This can be hard but try to be patient and take time to let them adjust. Babies and toddlers respond to warmth and sensitivity over time.
- Use your sense of touch to feel close to your baby or toddler. Try cuddling, light tickling, or massaging. For toddlers, try playing together with play dough, shaving cream, or sand.
Resources for Families Dealing with Injury

Sesame workshop’s program “Talk, Listen, and Learn” addresses injury for a preschool audience.

Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury
http://www.dcoe.health.mil/

The Wounded Warriors Project
http://www.wwphighcap.org/programs/family-support.aspx

The Veterans Crisis Line
http://veteranscrisisline.net/

“The Caring Bridge” is a support website for those with a loved one who is ill or injured.
http://www.caringbridge.org/

“Our Hero Handbook” was put together by spouses of injured service members
http://militarymedicineissues.info/online-resources/our_hero.htm

ADAPT is gearing up for the next wave of the project. You can help us better understand reintegration in military families and have a say in future resources and services provided to reintegrating military families!

If you live in Minnesota, are a parent of a 5-12 year old, and have been deployed (or your spouse/partner has been deployed) since 2001, we want to hear from you!

To learn more about the ADAPT project, go to www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt. For more information, you can call us at 612-624-4830 or e-mail us at adapt@umn.edu.

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