Living with Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Living through the deployment cycle comes with a great deal of uncertainty, and young children may find especially hard to cope with disruptions that change the routine of their daily life. The post 9/11 era has been especially challenging for families because of the added element of terrorism and active wars. The idea of ambiguous loss describes the feelings family members may be faced with when unclear and vague stressors are present. For example, when military families cannot predict their next move or the next deployment, the sense of uncertainty may feel like a layer of tension that overlays everyday life. Another example of ambiguous loss is when family members worry about harm and safety when a loved one is deployed. In this case, the deployed loved one is physically absent while psychologically present in thoughts.

Although parents may return safe from deployment, at the very least they often miss milestone events in children’s lives. Young children respond to ambiguous loss differently than adults and often are not able to express their feelings. They may feel anger at their parent for leaving while at the same time they may feel intense loyalty. They also may experience sadness and loneliness. To deal with emotional stress, they may act out their frustrations in play. Sometimes they struggle when the deployed parent returns. The transitions around the deployment and reintegration may be more difficult for children than the actual deployment because of the changes in routines and responsibilities. They may need extra support and love in these times.

Helping Young Children Cope

Providing stability and routine is crucial for young children. Here are some tips for addressing ambiguous loss throughout the deployment cycle:

- Tap into your kin network for support if possible. Grandparents are often key players in providing support and extra care. Being with those they love and trust can help children feel secure.
- If possible, seek to make play-dates with other preschoolers whose parent is deployed.
- Keep routines stable. Knowing what to expect hour by hour can help calm their anxieties.
- Because preschoolers cannot verbalize feelings easily, help them identify and label what they are feeling.
- Spend time with your preschooler just playing or reading a book and snuggling.
- Family rituals that children can look forward to foster a sense of belonging. Also, having regular chores may help even young children feel that they can contribute.
- Facilitating digital communication (email, Face Time, Skype) helps build a feeling of constancy in spite of distance.

Your Preschooler:

- Relies on routines to feel secure and confident.
- Enjoys looking at books and listening to stories from books.
- Is starting to share and take turns with peers.
- Wants to be more independent and do things without help.

Parent Tips:

Bedtime is often a soothing time to be close, read a book, or listen to soft music together.

Pay close attention to signs that your preschooler is feeling troubled: frequent crying, temper tantrums, or acting out toward caregiver, or acting out in play. These may be symptoms of larger issues and may need extra attention and love.
Resources

Dr. Pauline Boss on Ambiguous Loss:
http://www.ncri.org/professional-resource-library/video-conversation-about-ambiguous-loss-research
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2vYyefAgZ0

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg’s Seven Cs
http://www.fosteringresilience.com/7cs.php

Dr. Paula Rauch discusses Challenges vs. Trauma
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J169rx_Z-9M

Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief
By Pauline Boss

By Kenneth Ginsburg

Raising Our Children to be Resilient
By Linda Goldman

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.
If you know someone who might be interested, you can earn a $20 gift card for referring a family that joins the study.
For more information, you can call us at 612-624-4830 or e-mail us at adapt@umn.edu.

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Upcoming Topics Volume 17
Reconnecting as Couples after Deployment

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