Living with Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Living through the deployment cycle comes with a great deal of uncertainty, and children may find it especially hard because they do not have the coping skills that adults have developed over time. The post 9/11 era has been especially challenging 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. How do children cope with this? Research suggests that they feel the need to fill the absence of the missing parent and be strong for other family members. At the same time they may feel intense sadness and loneliness. To deal with emotional stress and ambiguity, 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. Children may need extra support and love in these times.

Helping Children Cope

Providing a layered support structure is crucial for children. This means that support can come from multiple places, including friends, family, school, coaches, and youth leaders. 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.
- Encourage children to build a social network with others their age whose parent(s) is deployed.
- Allow children to talk out their tension with friends and family, but also allow them to not talk if they don’t want to.
- Distraction from worries can also be a helpful coping skill. Going out and having fun can give children a break from stress.
- Family rituals that children can look forward to foster a sense of belonging. Also, having regular chores may help children feel that they can contribute.
- Facilitating digital communication (email, Face Time, Skype) helps build a feeling of constancy in spite of distance.

Your School Aged Child:
- Is beginning to form and express his or her own opinion
- Is beginning to understand right from wrong
- Is able to focus less on himself or herself and has more ability to be concerned about others
- Is learning about patience

Parent Tips:
Be aware of how much you share about deployment details and war conditions. School aged children may not be able to handle as much as older teens.

Pay close attention to signs that your child is feeling troubled: changes in school habits and grades, withdrawal from friends and family, or acting out in play. These may be symptoms of larger issues and may need professional support.
Resources

Dr. Pauline Boss on Ambiguous Loss:
http://www.ncfr.org/professional-resource-library/video-conversation-about-ambiguous-loss-research
https://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.

Contact Information:
Dept. of Family Social Science
University of Minnesota
Rm. 290 McNH
1985 Buford Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108
adapt@umn.edu
612-624-4830

Upcoming Topics Volume 17
Reconnecting as a Couple after Deployment

http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/adapt