



Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for School Personnel Teaching Military Children



Why are school personnel important for grieving students with a military background?

Nearly 2 million children and youth have a parent or guardian actively serving in the military¹. In addition to losing a parent or guardian, children can suffer Traumatic Grief due to the death of an uncle, aunt, grandparent, or other important person in the military to whom they have been close.

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How do students in military families differ from civilian students?

Students living with parents or caregivers who are actively serving in the military share the following:

- They are likely to switch schools 6-9 times.
- They move three times more often than their civilian peers.
- They often feel like the “new kid” in school.
- They most likely do not have a strong support system within their school due to multiple moves.
- They are a part of a military culture that many civilians do not understand.

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How do students grieve?

Students of all ages grieve the death of an important person. Grieving students can show a range of emotions and reactions. Sometimes they appear sad and talk about missing the person. Other times they play, interact with friends, and do their usual activities. Most students, with time, recover and adjust to the death. Typically, they are able to participate in “tasks” considered helpful to the grieving process:

- Understanding the person cannot come back
- Coping with feelings about the person and the death
- Adjusting to changes in life without the person
- Talking about memories and what that person meant to them
- Committing to relationships with new people
- Continuing on a healthy developmental path

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What is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

In Childhood Traumatic Grief, students have traumatic stress reactions to a death which interfere with their ability to accomplish the tasks of bereavement. When this happens, even happy thoughts and memories of the person remind students of the distressing way the person died. A younger student may be afraid to sleep alone at night due to nightmares about attempts to do CPR that she witnessed, while an older student may avoid playing on the school baseball team his father used to coach because it brings up painful thoughts about his father’s death from self-harm. These students get “stuck” on the traumatic aspects of the death and cannot process their grief successfully. When students with Traumatic Grief have scary thoughts, upsetting memories, and negative feelings related to how the person died, they may also have uncomfortable physical symptoms. To control and minimize the unpleasant feelings and reactions, they try to avoid the scary memories; avoid talking or thinking about anything related to the person or way the person died. They may also avoid people, places, or things that trigger upsetting thoughts and feelings. These reactions and the fear of stirring up scary reminders make it difficult to remember positive things or to talk about the person and what the person meant to them.

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Who develops Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Most students recover and adjust to the death of a family member, friend, or other important person. But a smaller number will develop Childhood Traumatic Grief. For military children, this can occur following a death from sudden causes such as combat related attacks, training related accidents, or suicide related to PTSD. Students can also develop symptoms when the death is due to causes such as toxic exposure to chemicals or combat related injuries after returning home, especially if the student is surprised or scared by the death or the student was exposed to a military parent’s complex or frightening medical procedures.

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What are Traumatic Stress Reactions in Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Grief related traumatic stress reactions may include the following:

- Intrusive reactions such as upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, memories, or play about the frightening way the person died
- Physical or physiological distress such as headaches, stomachaches, symptoms mimicking the way the deceased died, jumpiness, trouble concentrating

- Avoidance reactions such as withdrawal; acting as if not upset about the death; or avoiding reminders of the person, the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to the death
- Negative mood or beliefs related to the traumatic death such as anger, guilt, shame, self-blame, loss of trust, believing the world is unsafe
- Increased arousal such as irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, dropping grades, increased vigilance, and fears about safety of oneself or others; self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, suicidality)

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What are the signs you might see in a student with Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Students with Traumatic Grief may look different at different ages and developmental levels. However, these are common signs and symptoms of Traumatic Grief that you may observe:

- ***Showing age-related difficulties***

Preschool and young children may engage in repeated play about the death, may have trouble getting back on track with a routine, and are not easily comforted. School-aged students may be more preoccupied with details, show excessive worry, have bad dreams, and show more typical trauma responses. Teens may reveal their distress by drug or alcohol abuse, talking of self-harm, withdrawal, and feeling different from peers.

- ***Acting as if the person has not died***

Military families may experience long absences of the person as a result of their service. These absences can make it more difficult for some students to integrate a death into their lives. Young children do not understand the concept of finality and may believe the person will come back. Older students may be accustomed to life without the person on a day-to-day basis and may feel as if he or she is still just away on assignment.

- ***Being overly preoccupied with how the important person died***

This preoccupation may take the form of repeatedly asking questions or asking for details of the death, sometimes coming out of the blue and unrelated to the setting or situation.

- ***Reliving or re-enacting the traumatic death through play and/or artwork***

The student may re-enact the death or include themes of the event into his or her play, having the same tragic end or showing aspects of the death in drawings. Their play and art may portray military related details or inaccurate scenes. The student may also report nightmares or upsetting memories that interfere with participation and attention.

- ***Showing signs of emotional and/or behavioral distress when reminded of the loss***

Students may be reminded of their loss in a variety of ways, and this can sometimes lead to traumatic stress reactions. These are often referred to as trauma reminders and loss reminders. Reminders may be difficult to predict and can range from seemingly insignificant to highly disturbing events. Stress reactions may be caused by physical reminders, situations, thoughts, or things others say. Many regular school events (e.g., parent's night, class plays) can serve as reminders and lead to emotional distress for students. Holidays, such as Memorial Day or Fourth of July, will often be an emotionally difficult day of remembrance for those who have experienced the death of an important family member in the military.

- ***Showing signs of increased aggression***

Students may inaccurately perceive danger, feel vulnerable, or act out revenge fantasies that seem to be coming out of nowhere, triggered by reminders of the traumatic death ("trauma reminders"). A student's inappropriate behavior may be seen as acting out, rather than unresolved Traumatic Grief.

- ***Attempting to avoid activities, places, or people who serve as reminders of the traumatic death***

Students may avoid situations or conversations they fear will provoke painful or uncomfortable thoughts or feelings about the death. This may be evident when discussing military related news or history topics or activities.

- ***Withdrawing from key aspects of their environment***

Students may lose interest or stop participating in activities they previously enjoyed or show less willingness to interact with others. In school this may take the form of ignoring the you when called on in class, not participating in assigned group activities, not turning in homework, or withdrawing from extracurricular or social activities.

- ***Showing signs of emotional constriction***

Students may appear “numb” or “flat,” expressing neither positive or negative emotions.

- ***Being excessively “jumpy” or being easily startled***

Students may seem to be constantly on alert or on edge. You may see a student as “overly” aroused with increased activity levels, an inability to settle down, and impaired school performance resulting from inadequate sleep. For example, students with Traumatic Grief may become highly reactive to a noise as minor as the sudden dropping of a pencil after a after a parent’s suicide by a firearm.

- ***Showing signs of a loss of a sense of purpose and meaning to one’s life***

A traumatized student may show disinterest in previously valued goals or activities or may engage in increased risk-taking because “it doesn’t matter anymore.”

- ***Displaying poor academic performance***

The student has ongoing difficulty concentrating or participating in classroom assignments and activities (compared to his or her functioning before the death).

- ***Having persistent emotional distress***

The student continues to have significant difficulty regulating emotions (e.g., repeated episodes of crying, irritability, or fits of rage), especially in relation to reminders of the death or ongoing absence of the deceased.

- ***Showing signs of depression, withdrawal, and decreased communication***

A student may show signs of lethargy, negative mood, disruptions in appetite, loss of interest in valued activities, significant changes in weight, poor personal hygiene, and decreased interaction with others, including friends, family, and adults.

- ***Expressing thoughts of suicide or homicide, or signs that the student is intentionally hurting him- or herself (for example, a child cutting himself):***

A student may express thoughts of suicide or homicide verbally or via a journal or music lyrics, or you may observe marks or bruises from cutting or burning. You should take these behaviors seriously and immediately report them to the child’s parents and appropriate school personnel.

- ***Increasing antisocial or delinquent behavior***

Truancy, aggression, stealing, lying, verbal threats, drug/alcohol use, or other behaviors that place students or those around them at increased risk of harm indicate a referral is needed to a higher level of intervention.

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How can you help students with Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Be informed about military culture

You need to be sensitive to military culture, especially as it relates to grief. For a student, being part of a military family typically is a source of pride for the family. Once the person dies, students may struggle with their sense of identity, being a member of the military vs being a civilian. Military funerals are full of custom and ritual that can be difficult to understand. Students may feel proud about the person’s service but feel guilty for wanting the person back.

Prepare and plan for school re-entry

Check in with the student’s family to see how s/he is doing and to help prepare the student, his/her classmates, and staff with the return to school especially if the death has been in local or national news. Keep in mind that not all students want

their peers to know about the death. Talk to the family about their wishes and the student's preference for what and how much information to communicate to peers and others about the death. Ask how the peers can help.

Create a supportive school environment

Maintain normal school routines as much as possible. A student with Traumatic Grief can feel as if life is chaotic and out of his or her control, but it helps to have a predictable class schedule and format. The student may need extra reassurance and explanation about any changes. You should look for opportunities to help classmates who are struggling with how best to help and understand a student with traumatic grief.

Listen and be available

After a student's family member has died, take a moment to privately express your sympathy for the loss. Let the student know he or she can come to you for any reason, such as needing to take breaks from the classroom, extra time for assignments or tests, or other requests. Do not force a student to talk about the death; this may be more harmful than helpful.

Accept a range of responses

A bereaved student may or may not need to talk. Listen calmly to a student's feelings, worries, or academic problems. Conversely, some traumatized students may talk about things unrelated to the death to take a break from their grief. Accept their feelings (even anger) and remind them that it's normal to experience emotional and behavioral difficulties following the death of an important person.

Answer a student's questions

As students try to make sense of the death of the important person, they may ask adults relatively shocking questions, including questions about gruesome details. It's OK to say that you don't know the answer to a question. Don't provide gory details, as these are best managed by a mental health professional.

Understand angry or aggressive outbursts

Take the student aside and provide time to calm down. Don't be punitive, but address aggressive or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly. Talk to the student later in private and help to label negative feelings. Help the student refrain from engaging in self-destructive or self-defeating behaviors. Grieving students need caring, calm limit setting. Collaborate with the guidance counselor or other mental health professionals for discipline strategies.

Recognize misconceptions and media attention

Media attention and short news cycles can be troubling for military families. Keep an ear out for those who may share unsolicited personal opinions about politics and the military that could be insensitive or upsetting to a grieving student.

Raise the awareness of school staff and personnel in the school community

Educate and collaborate with others in the school environment who are in contact with the student (e.g., coaches, special activity staff) who may misinterpret changes in behavior and respond inappropriately to a student's reactions to trauma and loss reminders. Share information about and suggestions for being a more trauma- and military-informed school community and for helping students manage specific trauma reminders.

Understand and minimize traumatic reminders in the school setting

Trauma reminders are cues that remind the child of the traumatic death. There may be general reminders, such as current events related to US forces, history lessons about wars, or the pledge of allegiance. There are other reminders specific to the individual student that may be hard to predict. When students with Traumatic Grief encounter these reminders, they respond with traumatic symptoms like those described above. You can help by collaborating with family and counselors to (1) inquire about any specific reminders for the student, (2) recognize and minimize the student's trauma reminders in the school setting, and (3) support the student in using coping skills if and when reactions to trauma reminders occur.

Modify teaching strategies

Balance normal school expectations with flexibility. Consider postponing or cancelling large tests or projects that require extensive energy and concentration for a period of time. Be sensitive to the student having difficulty, for example, on the anniversary of a death or related to certain triggering topics or assignments. Consider ways to rearrange or modify class assignments or work. Use teaching strategies that promote concentration, retention, and recall and that increase a sense of predictability, control, and performance.

Support families

Build a relationship of trust with the student's family. Talk about re-integration into the class upon the student's return and the family's preferences for sharing information with others. Maintain open communication with the family about the student's behavior and progress, and provide suggestions for educational support at home. Follow through and never betray the family's trust. It can be helpful to designate a liaison who can coordinate among you, the principal, guidance counselor, other appropriate school personnel, the family, and the student.

Inform others and coordinate services

Inform school administration and school counselors/psychologists about your concerns regarding the student. Coordinate help related to the student, academic performance, the loss, the family, or the home.

Realize that it can be difficult to acknowledge or deal with traumatic events and death

You should monitor your own thoughts and feelings about the death and the student and family's experience, seek support from other staff when needed, and engage in positive relationships and activities with supportive family members and friends outside of work.

Make referrals

Traumatic grief can be very difficult to resolve, and professional help is often needed. Coordinate with the appropriate staff for a referral to a professional, preferably one who has experience working with children and adolescents and with issues of grief and trauma.

Where do you find additional information and help?

Effective treatments are available for Childhood Traumatic Grief, and students can return to their normal functioning. Additional information for students, parents, professionals, pediatricians, and educators is available at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org with materials specific to Traumatic Grief at www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief.

Resources specifically related to military culture, military children, and survivors of military loss are also available:

- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement: Supporting Children and Families of Military Line-of-Duty Deaths (<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org>)
- Webinars: Grief Support for Military Children (<https://www.taps.org/webinar/2016/april26>) & Supporting Military Children With Traumatic Grief (<https://learn.nctsn.org/enrol/index.php?id=475>)
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS): Magazine, webinars, peer support, events based and online (<https://www.taps.org>)

Footnotes

1. Nicosia, N., Wong, E., Shier, V., Massachi, S., & Datar, A. (2016). Parental deployment, adolescent academic and social-behavioral maladjustment, and parental psychological well-being in military families. *Public health reports (Washington, D.C. : 1974)*, 132(1), 93-105. doi:10.1177/0033354916679995