

Supporting Forces Families

The death of someone important can be devastating for any child but, for the children of families in the Armed Forces, there are additional challenges. Civilians do not always appreciate the very different way of life associated with being in the Forces. The following has been written with input from some of these families to help you understand what they, and their children, need to help them at a time of great sadness. It applies for any death that affects a Forces' family and not just those that occur in action.

Bereaved Forces children experience multiple loss

Forces children may have already faced disruption to their schooling due to postings every two years or so. Therefore, having to move house, or even country, quite quickly as a result of a death is doubly hard at what is already a very difficult and stressful time. Leaving familiar surroundings, and friends, can be stressful and isolating for the children and their families at a time when understanding from those around them is crucial.

A child may have to change school mid-term. This will add to the stress, as they may face difficulties integrating into a new school, and having to make new friends when other children are in already established friendships. If a place is not available at a catchment school this may give rise to distress caused by journey to school alone rather than with friends or neighbours.

Many forces children attend boarding schools, as being the only way to maintain some continuity in their education. Following a bereavement, this may no longer be a financial option, requiring a change to schooling in the state system. Every time Forces family children change school they are faced with having to explain their situation all over again. For some this may be too hard and they choose to keep quiet. Friends and staff can inadvertently say hurtful or inappropriate things which add to their grief.

It may be worth mentioning to a school that Child Bereavement UK has a helpful Schools Information Pack (www.childbereavementuk.org/For/Shop/ForProfessionals/SchoolsInformation) and a section for schools on the website (www.childbereavementuk.org/For/ForSchools). The Ministry of Defence has arranged for this pack, which has an information sheet on supporting bereaved Forces children in school, to be given to a school with a Forces family within 48 hours of a death. This will be distributed via the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre and Visiting Officers.

Loss of identity

When someone close dies, Forces families lose not just their own family unit but also belonging to a much wider one, i.e. their Regiment or Battalion. The family's identity is very bound up with the role of the parent and if that person dies, everyone is forced to rethink their place in the world. All bereaved children are vulnerable but adolescents and teenager especially may feel a huge sense of loss around who they thought they were and struggle with what feels like a whole new identity.

Understanding the permanence of death is particularly difficult

It is well recognised that young children can struggle to develop the understanding that death is permanent and final. Forces children are used to their father/mother being away for long periods of time and therefore they may find it particularly difficult to accept and that the person who has died is never going to come back. This can inhibit their ability to begin to deal with the reality of what has happened and possibly complicate their grief.

Understanding the difference between dead and alive can be harder

For young children, as long as they are well prepared and given a choice, seeing the dead body can help them begin to understand what being dead means and the difference between dead and alive. For understandable reasons, children in Forces families may be denied this opportunity. This can make a reality which is already difficult to grasp even more so.

A death in action can be unexpected

A death in action can often be totally unexpected, sudden and traumatic, heightening the sense of shock and disbelief. This can be added to by happening far away from home. Visiting the scene after a traumatic death can help those affected to make some sense of what has happened and to start to work out answers to “how” and “why”. The opportunity to do this is limited if it happens in some far away and dangerous place. Without answers to those questions, a child may make up their own story based on unhelpful fantasies, adding to their distress.

Being in the public eye

Forces families may have to cope with intrusive media coverage. Even once the funeral has taken place, the family may have to face Service Inquiries into what happened and an Inquest. These events can happen some time after the death, reawakening feelings of shock and trauma for all family members. Ongoing coverage of the conflict can have a big impact on children and act as a constant trigger to their grief.

How to Help a Forces Family

For any grieving child, school offers an opportunity for distraction from their grief for a while. Schools can offer space and time for children to escape from overwhelming emotions found at home. This is even more so the case for children of Forces Families who may have extra pressures at home as a result of the increased amount of change they can experience.

It will help to remember that Forces Families are more likely to experience multiple losses after a death. As a result, bereaved Forces children may be more susceptible to low self-esteem, loss of identity, and may find the expected changes that happen, for example within a school environment, difficult to cope with. Any positive feedback and recognition of achievements, however small, will be good. They may require more support than usual around times of change.

Other ways to help

Be aware that bereaved Forces families lose a very structured way of life and all the support mechanisms that go with it. Any practical help that can be offered will be greatly appreciated, for example helping out with school runs etc.

Encourage resilience by helping a bereaved Forces child or young person practice a response to possible questions or comments from peers such as “how did you Dad die?” Trying out using the words, with a trusted adult, will help them to deal with any unexpected emotions, and give confidence.

It helps to remember that forces families are surrounded by constant reminders in the media. Try to sensitively remind peer groups that talking about what they see in the media about any conflicts, might be particularly upsetting for their friends from Forces families.

Further guidance is available by phoning the Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line 01494 568900. Child Bereavement UK is working closely with The Childhood Bereavement Network www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk and the Ministry of Defence, to improve support for bereaved Forces families and their children

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