

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 from school and the staff who work there.

Bereaved Forces' children experience multiple loss. Service 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 the result of a death is doubly hard at what is already a very difficult and stressful time. Leaving familiar surroundings, schools 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 a journey to school alone rather than with friends or neighbours.

Many service 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 a Forces family child has to 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 adding to the grief.

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 teenagers 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 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 place. Without answers to those questions a child may make up their own based on unhelpful fantasies.

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 or a Coroner’s 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 in school. Everything throughout this Information Pack applies but with some extra suggestions for Forces’ families below.

For any grieving child, school offers an opportunity to forget about their grief for a while. This is even more so the case for children of Forces’ families who are surrounded by constant reminders in the media. Be aware of this and try to create space and time in school for them to escape from overwhelming emotions. For further information see fact sheet “Supporting a Bereaved Pupil” .

Encourage resilience by helping bereaved Forces’ pupils to practice a response to questions or comments from peers such as “how did your Dad die?”

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.

It will help if staff can be aware 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 within any 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.

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 school can offer will be greatly appreciated such as getting the PTA involved with school runs etc.

Resources

Service Children by Joy O’Neill

A guide for Education and Welfare Professionals. Particularly useful for School Governors and Senior Management Teams. Covers a wide number of issues including a chapter on Bereavement and Trauma.

The Overlooked Casualties of Conflict

A report commissioned by The Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children’s Fund. Has a section on dealing with a parent’s death. Can be downloaded for free from

<http://rnrnmchildrensfund.org.uk/about-us/research/>