



# Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: FOR MILITARY PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



Most military families adjust well to the challenges that accompany military life. Although military youth are raised in a culture of strength and resiliency, military families and children may experience mental health issues or challenges due to the unique stressors that impact military families, such as deployments, temporary duty assignments (TDY), permanent change in stations (PCS), and the fast-paced changes to home life and routines. This guide was created by military parents and professionals to provide you, as a military parent/caregiver, with some essential information to address these specific issues. It also provides ways to help your child(ren) or teen cope with military-related stressors, traumas, and losses.

## QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT CHILD TRAUMA

### ***What is a traumatic experience?***

An event that someone goes through that is perceived as scary, extremely stressful, or overwhelms one's coping. These experiences can initiate strong and persistent negative emotions.

### ***How does trauma impact military families?***

Most military family members have an understanding of the risks associated with being part of the military community. These risks may often be balanced by the associated benefits and growth opportunities that accompany military life and careers. For many military families there is a great sense of pride and belonging to their military communities, branches, and units, which can foster resiliency along with personal and professional growth. Aside from the risks and benefits associated with military life, you and your family might have a heightened awareness of additional trauma(s) that could occur.

These additional traumas might include death of a loved one, ambiguous loss, traumatic separation, combat-related injuries, combat-related deaths, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, domestic violence, child maltreatment, witness to violence, bullying, stalking/harassment, discrimination.

### **Traumatic Experiences**

- Physical Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Natural and Technological Disasters
- Terrorism
- Training and Motor Vehicle Accidents
- Domestic Violence
- Vicious Dog Bites

### **Military Specific Experiences**

- Combat Deployment
- Prolonged Separation from parent
- Death or Loss of parent or family member
- Parent suffers combat related PTSD/TBI
- Physical Injury



## MILITARY FAMILIES ARE AT AN ELEVATED RISK FOR EXPERIENCING TRAUMA, ESPECIALLY DURING PERIODS OF HEIGHTENED STRESS FOR THE FAMILY.

Your military life is often intertwined with your and your family's personal life, which can add layers of complexity onto your ability to address and respond to traumatic experiences. When a trauma occurs, you or your family might experience additional challenges emotionally, socially, behaviorally, and physically. These challenges may impact you or your family's ability to effectively parent, maintain employment, succeed in school, sustain meaningful friendships and/or relationships, as well as maintain self-care. Along with challenges that may occur as a military family, you also have access to resources within the military community to support resiliency and healing from any additional trauma(s).

### ***What are some of the common reactions that your child or teen may experience after a traumatic event?***

It is natural and common to feel strong emotions in response to a traumatic experience or loss. You or your child may feel confused by the sudden nature of an event as it can disrupt day-to-day routines and expectations. Your family may try to make sense of the trauma in the absence of readily or clearly available information. You may experience thoughts or images of the trauma that replay in your mind. You or your teen may avoid talking about the trauma as a way to cope with the impact of the event. You or your child may have sleep difficulties including loss of sleep, too much sleep or nightmares of the event. It is possible for these reactions, along with feelings of anxiety and depression, to linger as you and your family experience the ongoing thoughts and feelings related to the trauma.

It can be hard keeping track of all of the behaviors you see or reactions your child or teen may be having. The following page is a checklist for you to use and then discuss with your family's pediatrician or other professional (e.g., therapist, nurse, counselor, social worker) when seeking help.).

As a parent or caregiver, you can help support your child who is having traumatic stress reactions by knowing the warning signs, noticing a change in behavior, or the presence of new behaviors. Youth experiencing traumatic stress reactions or behavior can exhibit warning signs through what they say, what they do, or how they feel.

The next page includes a helpful checklist for you to use when needed. This checklist is a tool to help you to keep track of different behaviors or reactions your child or teen may be having. These reactions include typical reactions that may appear after a traumatic event. If you have any concerns about your child's or teen's behaviors or mental health, it is important to talk to a professional (e.g., doctor, therapist, nurse, counselor, social worker) about those concerns.





## REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC STRESS – HELPFUL CHECKLIST

Disclaimer - It is important to know that not all youth who experience traumatic stress reactions show all of these signs. Your child may only show a sign or two. At the same time, not all youth who have one or more of these warning signs may be experiencing traumatic stress reactions. As a parent or caregiver, you know your child best and are well equipped to notice when things are different and if your child or teen may need extra support.



Put a check mark in the box next to any behavior you have observed that you wish to discuss with a professional. Share this information with them during your next visit.

### **My child or teen has been:**

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling sad and depressed  | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding discussions of unpleasant memories or certain difficult topics                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Wanting to not think or talk about the traumatic event                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Showing no interest in activities they use to like   | <input type="checkbox"/> Isolating or separating from others  | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding places, people, things that make you think about the traumatic event |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling to feel positive emotions   | <input type="checkbox"/> Having negative thoughts about themselves or others  | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling scared for no apparent reason   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crying easily  | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling worthless or exhibiting low self-esteem  | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling out of control  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling irritable often  | <input type="checkbox"/> Having poor body image or concerns about their image that are out of the norm                | <input type="checkbox"/> Forgetting details of what happened in the traumatic event                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling tired often or has low energy  | <input type="checkbox"/> Being easily angered   | <input type="checkbox"/> Having trouble concentrating at school or at home                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having changes in typical sleep and eating habits  | <input type="checkbox"/> Being physically or verbally aggressive (e.g., yelling, name calling, hitting, biting, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Racing heart rate, sweating or breathing not due to exercise                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having nightmares or bad dreams  | <input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing sexual aggression towards peers   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having difficulty concentrating or has lack of focus   | <input type="checkbox"/> Having troubles with their friends   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appearing anxious and nervous  | <input type="checkbox"/> Having difficulty with personal boundaries   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying often   | <input type="checkbox"/> Having difficulty saying no or is excessively compliant                                      |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing panic or anxiety attacks  | <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling with concentrating and problems with learning                                     |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having racing or repeated thoughts   | <input type="checkbox"/> Having difficulty following directions or rules  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fidgeting or difficulty sitting still  | <input type="checkbox"/> Having suicidal thoughts and attempts or engaging in self-harm                               |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing stomachaches, headaches, or other body pains without having an underlying medical condition | <input type="checkbox"/> Having thoughts about harming others   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Struggling with new fears (i.e., social situations, separations, changes, etc.)                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about the trauma all the time   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing sudden changes in mood  |   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being easily startled or jumpy   |   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Remembering unpleasant memories  |   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or reminders of unpleasant memories   |   |  |

### **Here are a few signs or symptoms that you may find yourself also experiencing in addition to those already mentioned:**

- Feeling guilty
- Blaming yourself or your child
- Being overly protective of your child
- Being overly permissive
- Becoming overwhelmed
- Feeling worried that your child won't recover
- Having your own PTSD symptoms

If you are concerned that your child is experiencing any of these symptoms, it is important to talk with your child to learn more about their symptoms or difficulties. Ask your child how often they have these experiences? How long have these symptoms been happening? How much does it bother them when it happens? If you have any concerns after talking with your child, you should speak with your preferred mental health or medical professional.





## HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS THAT YOU MIGHT ASK A MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER TO GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICES:

- How can receiving treatment help my child and family?
- Are there different types of services? If so, what are they?
- What types of services can be helpful for my child or family?
- What types of trauma specific services are provided?
- When should I be concerned about my children? Signs and symptoms to look out for?
- How long will treatment last for my child?
- What is mental health treatment? What is trauma-specific services?
- Is mental health/trauma treatment the same as supportive counseling?
- What is resiliency? How can I help my child to become resilient?



## QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD AFTER TRAUMA

### ***How can you support your child or teen in the immediate aftermath of a trauma?***

As a military parent/caregiver, you can support your child or teen in many ways after a traumatic experience. You can support them by recognizing signs or cues that they may be experiencing an increased level of distress (see segment on traumatic stress reactions above). You can monitor changes in their behaviors following a traumatic event; this will help you recognize when to support your child.

Another important way you can support your child is to maintain a predictable and consistent routine. Predictable routines help children and teens feel safe, especially after a trauma. These routines can include, but are not limited to, a vibrant morning routine, a soothing bedtime routine, or an enjoyable mealtime routine.

To provide emotional support and to nurture your child, you can talk with them and validate their feelings. Some common statements you can use to validate your child's experiences include *"It is okay to feel that way. We can talk about it if you'd like"*, or *"I can see how you would feel that way. That was a hard thing to go through"*, or *"I know it is hard right now, but I'm here for you."*



Another way to provide comfort to your child might include soothing strategies (dependent upon age) such as rubbing their back, singing them a song, going on a walk together, listening to calming music, or other ideas based on what your child or teen likes or finds soothing. Suggestions for soothing strategies must take into account what each child or teen would find calming and comforting, as well as avoid any potentially triggering impact.

Lastly, it is important for you as a parent/caregiver to provide continuous positive interactions with your child or teen following a traumatic experience. This helps your child or teen balance their emotional experiences. Some positive interactions (dependent upon age) might include talking about their day, playing games together, going on walks, reading a book together, watching a movie together, and other fun activities your child enjoys.

### ***How do you talk to your child or teen after a trauma?***

If you have learned that your child or teen has experienced a trauma, it is important to remain calm. Before speaking with your them, try to recognize your own emotional state and work through some of those initial feelings. It can be helpful to prepare yourself for a discussion with them. Think through the concerns you want to talk with your child or teen about. One of the most effective ways you can talk to your child or teen is to express yourself in a calm, curious, and soft tone of voice while maintaining an open and non-judgmental approach.



Here are some tips for starting those discussions with young children, school-age children and teenagers.

ISSUES	YOUNG CHILDREN	SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN	TEENAGERS
<b>AT SCHOOL</b>	I know some kids get really big feelings at school (or daycare) or even do things they aren't used to doing. What are some of your big feelings you have at school?	How is school going (or after-school program)? I know some kids have trouble in school (or after-school). It can be helpful to talk about it if you want. What is hard for you in school?	How is school going? I know there can be struggles in school as a teenager. Would you like to discuss what's been going on? I am here to talk.
<b>FRIENDS</b>	Sometimes having friends can give us really big feelings. What are some really big feelings you have about your friends?	How do you feel about your friendships? I know friendships can change or be really hard. Is there anything hard about any of your friendships right now?	How do you feel about your friendships? I know it's easy to have struggles with friends, especially right now. I am here to talk.
<b>EMOTIONAL</b>	<p>Sometimes we have big feelings that might feel weird or uncomfortable in our body. What are some big feelings you have?</p> <p>*If young children are unable to put their big feelings into words, ask them to draw how they feel or what makes them feel angry, sad, scared, worried, etc.</p>	<p>I remember having some strong feelings about things at your age. I also remember that helped me to have someone to talk to about these feelings. How have you been feeling lately?</p> <p>*If school-age children are unable to put their feelings into words, read a book with them and have them reflect on what they have read and how it relates to how they are feeling, or have them try write a story or their feelings and then talk about them.</p>	<p>Being a teenager can be really difficult. Lots of teens feel different pressures. I remember having some pretty intense feelings when my life got stressful. How have you been feeling lately? I am here to talk about these things with you anytime.</p> <p>*If teenagers are unable to put their feelings into words, have them write what they are feeling in a journal or try doing a collage with them.</p>

**Where can you get help for your child or teen who has experienced a trauma?**

The major sources for a confidential mental health referral in the military community are TRICARE and Military OneSource. Both of these agencies can provide you with treatment options as well as assist you with locating a mental health provider near your local base or installation. If your child or teen has an urgent mental health concern or has suffered a recent traumatic experience, resources are available through the TRICARE Nurse Advice Line, local Emergency Room as well as other hotlines. In cases of child maltreatment, neglect or abuse, or domestic violence, you can contact your installation's Family Advocacy Program (FAP) for more information. If your base does not have these resources, you may contact local authorities or talk to your child's or teen's pediatrician.

As you can see, there are many benefits to talking to a trauma-informed mental health provider. How do you go about getting a referral for treatment? Fortunately, there are many different ways you can receive a mental health referral. Some of those include through a medical provider,





health insurance, school professionals, or family-based services such as the family advocacy center on your base/ installation. Keep in mind that mental health referrals can be on or off base or installation. To receive a referral for trauma-informed professional mental health treatment provider, please go to: [www.TRICARE.mil/mentalhealth](http://www.TRICARE.mil/mentalhealth) or call 1-800-TRICARE, as well as <https://www.militaryonesource.mil> or call 800-342-9647.

***What if your child or teen experienced a trauma and is exhibiting difficulties in school, with friends or in class?***

Depending on whether your school is located on a base or installation or off, there are different resources to support your child or teen if they have experienced trauma and are struggling in school. Some staff available at schools to assist you with your concerns include school counselors, Child and Youth Military Family Life Consultants, school nurses, social workers and psychologists. School liaisons are available at most military installations to support military families. Their role is to help families coordinate access to resources in the community as well as on installation. School liaisons also help military children get set up at school.

***What should you do if you have immediate concerns about your child or teen?***

If you have any emerging concerns about lack of safety for your child, teen or others that are related to acts or thoughts of harming themselves or harming others, you can reach out to crisis help lines. You can also learn more about suicide and how it may affect your family. For more information what to look out for and how to support your child or teen if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts, read the [NCTSN Understanding Child Suicide: For Military Parents](#) fact sheet. This fact sheet provides practical information to help guide you in asking questions and starting up conversations with your child or teen who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

If you have any immediate concerns or in the case of an emergency, please call 911 or contact local law enforcement. Otherwise, call Tricare nurse advice line or the National Suicide Prevention lifeline, both of these numbers can be found in the Resources section of this fact sheet.

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### Benefits of a talking to a trauma-informed professional mental health provider include:

- Providing a safe place for your family to heal
- Protecting your family's privacy
- Receiving help from trained professionals who work with children and families
- Receiving help from those knowledgeable with the military and its culture
- Learning how to support your family's needs
- Sharing difficult information confidentially
- Gaining the tools for coping with your experience(s)
- Potentially covered by insurance



## RESOURCES

If symptoms continue to persist or interrupt your child's social, academic or family life, here are some military specific resources that you can use to get further assistance or a referral for mental health services to address these issues.

For information related to TRICARE services, please check out their website: [www.TRICARE.mil/mentalhealth](http://www.TRICARE.mil/mentalhealth) or call 1-800-TRICARE.

All TRICARE Contact information: <https://tricare.mil/ContactUs/CallUs/AllContacts>

TRICARE Find a Doctor: <https://tricare.mil/FindDoctor>

Military OneSource: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil> or call 800-342-9647

Military OneSource Family and Relationship: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/family-relationships>

Military One Source Child and Youth Behavioral Military Family Life Consultant:  
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/confidential-help/non-medical-counseling/military-and-family-life-counseling/child-and-youth-behavioral-military-and-family-life-counselors>

Nurse Advice Line:            CONUS: 1-800-874-2273, Option 1  
  OCONUS: MHSNurseAdviceLine.com

Military Crisis Line:         1-800-273-8255, then press 1

Suicide Crisis line for military service members and family: This confidential, immediate help is available 24/7 at no cost to active duty, Guard and reserve members, their families and friends. Contact the <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/ActiveDuty.aspx> at 800-273-8255, then press 1, or access online chat by texting 838255.

Treatment Locator from SAMHSA listing state-licensed providers who specialize in treating substance use disorders, addiction, and mental illness: <https://findtreatment.gov>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

SAMHSA's National Helpline – [1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/1800662)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) [www.militarychild.org](http://www.militarychild.org)

National Military Family Association [www.militaryfamily.org](http://www.militaryfamily.org)