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## **Addressing Grief and Loss Issues With Children and Adolescents of Military Families**

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According to the U. S. Department of Defense (2008), there are 1,417,243 people in the armed forces and approximately 44% of active duty forces have children. These children experience many challenging situations associated with the military including deployment of parents and the potential death of a parent while in active duty. The Department of Defense reported over 4,100 deaths among service personnel serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom and an additional 590 deaths were reported among those serving in Operation Enduring Freedom. Thus, a need exists for providing services to children and adolescent in military families.

When addressing grief and loss issues with children and adolescents in military families, there remains a need to distinguish the unique issues this population experiences when compared to other children and adolescents experiencing grief and loss issues. Deployment is one experience unique to military families. When a military parent is deployed, children and adolescents may experience ambiguous loss due to military parents being psychologically present, but not physically present in their lives, resulting in confusion regarding boundaries and family roles (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Additionally, the experience associated with the death of a parent in the military differs from other parent deaths (Hardaway, 2004). When a military parent dies in active duty, military personnel communicate this information to the family. Initially, the family receives financial support and assistance with the funeral arrangements, which may occur in a national cemetery. However, following the funeral, the family may experience dramatic changes not associated with other deaths. This includes a limited time to move when the family has previously lived in military housing. The move may involve relocating to the United States when the family was stationed overseas. Additionally, the children may experience attending a new

school that is not a Department of Defense School. With the change in schools, children are no longer surrounded by children who also have a parent in the military. Furthermore, the professionals in the new school may lack awareness and training in working with military children. Therefore, a need exists to address the grief and loss issues unique to military families. In addressing these issues, youth receive assistance and support in developing healthy coping skills and normalizing the feelings associated with grief (Carroll & Mathewson, 2000).

This article presents a brief overview of Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief and loss. Additionally, the authors discuss an overview of developmental areas to consider when addressing grief and loss issues, including emotional and cognitive responses. The authors also present techniques to employ when working with children and adolescents in military families to cope with issues related to grief and loss. These techniques include bibliotherapy, expressive arts, and the use of rituals and ceremonies. Finally, the authors present a case study, which integrates the areas emphasized within this article.

### **Theoretical Overview and Developmental Considerations**

To provide a framework for understanding the grieving process, the authors employ the theory of grief and loss proposed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), as it relates to military families. Kubler-Ross proposed five stages/processes of grief and loss to include: (a) denial and isolation; (b) anger; (c) bargaining; (d) depression and withdrawal; and (e) acceptance. In this theory, the emphasis is focused on the process of experiencing feelings, acknowledging that each person experiences these stages differently in a nonlinear manner.

In the case of deployment, the family may have only a short period of time to prepare for the impending change. Experiencing denial may complicate this process and hinder successful family preparation. Additionally, throughout the deployment process, family members may cycle through the various stages as they attempt to gain acceptance. When a parent dies during active duty, the military informs the family and takes an active role in making arrangements for the funeral. This generally occurs quickly and some children may struggle with fully understanding what is happening until the funeral is over and the family experiences the changes and transitions associated with the death. Following the funeral, children and adolescents usually have a short time to say good-bye to friends before leaving their school and home when the family is stationed at a military base. As they struggle with acceptance, the children and adolescents may again cycle through the various stages of Kubler-Ross' theory (1969). Thus, the grieving process begins with the notification of the loss and continues throughout the transition period.

A parent's response to an approaching deployment or the death of a military spouse may impact a child's response. The remaining parent may struggle with being emotionally available to their children, due to struggling with their own emotional and cognitive responses to the loss. However, the parent may lack awareness of how their own processing of the grief and loss issues is impacting the child. Therefore, it remains essential to work with the parent while providing counseling to a child. This may involve recommending the parent receive his/her own individual counseling, while also involving

the parent in the child's counseling process. With this intervention, the child and parent both receive counseling to assist them in progressing through Kubler-Ross' stages of grief and loss (1969).

An additional area to consider encompasses the developmental level of the clients. Developmental differences exist between children and adolescents and adults, including emotional and cognitive responses (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). Attempting to apply techniques to all populations without considering these differences may result in employing ineffective techniques. Therefore, it remains essential to consider emotional and cognitive differences among ages when addressing grief and loss issues with military families.

In considering emotional responses, children and adolescents may experience difficulty in expressing their feelings in healthy ways following the deployment or death of a parent while in active duty. Additionally, children and adolescents may express their feelings differently depending on their developmental level. Young children reveal their emotions through play, while adolescents are able to verbalize their feelings. Thus, in providing interventions to assist children with healthy expression of feelings, it remains essential to focus on the developmental level in order to provide a developmentally appropriate intervention.

Children will also differ in their cognitive responses due to developmental differences. When considering Piaget's developmental theory (1970) children begin at the sensorimotor stage and progress to the formal operational stage. Through this process they progress to concrete thinking and finally to abstract reasoning. In considering the enhancement of cognitive abilities specifically related to death, a child's understanding of death shifts from a view that this is a reversible event to a perspective that death is permanent (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). When focusing on deployment, younger children may have difficulty understanding the concept of time. Visual representations showing the length of time that their military parent will be gone may assist them in coping with the deployment. Therefore, counselors modify interventions to meet clients at their present cognitive level, in order to work effectively with them.

## **Interventions**

When considering interventions, two approaches are commonly used with children and adolescents experiencing bereavement issues. These approaches include cognitive-behavioral treatment and a client-centered approach (Goodman, 2004). In employing a cognitive-behavioral approach, the focus pertains to the development of healthy coping skills, whereas a client-centered approach emphasizes the relationship through support and challenge. Thus, the selection of an approach impacts the direction the counselor will take with a client.

The counselor may employ a variety of techniques to assist children and adolescents in coping with the deployment or death of a loved one. The authors will focus on exploring three interventions: a) bibliotherapy, b) art therapy, and c) rituals and ceremonies. The discussion of these interventions is focused on specifically addressing

the needs of military families; however, clinicians may adapt the techniques to meet the needs of other children and adolescents experiencing grief and loss issues.

The first intervention, bibliotherapy, involves using books to address therapeutic issues and to solve problems. Numerous children's books exist focusing on grief and loss issues. Additionally, a variety of books focus specifically on grief and loss related to military deployment and death. Using books may assist children and adolescents by normalizing the deployment process. Additionally, the books may assist youth with identifying feelings related to deployment or death of a military parent. Furthermore, books may present healthy ways to cope with grief and loss issues experienced by military children.

Counselors may employ books when working with children individually or in groups, or create a resource library of books for parents to check out and read to their children. In acquiring books, counselors should attempt to have a selection representing various cultures. Counselors may also employ using books with other techniques including art therapy.

Art may assist children and adolescents with expressing feelings and processing the experienced loss. For example, the counselor may have clients draw pictures of their family before and after the death of their military parents to help identify and discuss their perspectives about what has changed in the family. Furthermore, a child or adolescent can employ art to capture memories of their military parent. This may involve drawing, photography, etc. and also writing in the form of journaling, stories, or poems when used with older children. Additionally, youth may create memory books, which the first author has used successfully with children of all ages, varying the degree of assistance and use of materials depending on the age of the child. The memory book, when working with children coping with the death of a military parent, may include memories of their parent, as well as memories of their previous home, school, and friends, when transitioning to a new home and school. This may assist the client with expressing their feelings about their losses and their experiences related to the transition. Furthermore, the memory books provide youth with something tangible that they can keep to share with their surviving parent or others and to also look through on their own in the future.

A third intervention involves the use of rituals and ceremonies. Children and adolescents living in military families experience frequent changes beyond their control, including frequent moves involving change of homes and schools (Hall, 2008). The development of ceremonies and rituals may assist a child or adolescent in coping with grief and loss related to the deployment or death of the military parent, while providing them with some ownership and control over the implemented activities. A ceremony may involve a child creating a special way to say good-bye after the death of a military parent, in addition to the formalized ceremony held on the day of the funeral. This may involve writing a message and burning it, or releasing it in a balloon. Thus, the child oriented ceremony provides support while allowing the child some control over what occurs during the ceremony and to personalize their good-bye.

Rituals also facilitate the grief and loss process (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006; Hardaway, 2004). This may involve creating a special time, place, and manner to

communicate consistently with the military parent while he/she is overseas. Furthermore, the family may establish special rituals between the child and the parent that remains at home, occurring at designated times throughout the day or on special holidays. Thus, allowing the child to take ownership in creating rituals and ceremonies, and expressing feelings through art and bibliotherapy, assists with developing healthy coping skills.

### *Case Example*

Jenny is nine years old. Her father was killed while stationed in Iraq two months ago. Jenny and her mother were residing on a military base in Germany. After her father's death, they flew back to the United States for the funeral. Then, they returned to Germany to prepare for moving back permanently to the states. They had only a few weeks and then they moved in with Jenny's grandmother in the states.

Jenny didn't have much time to say good-bye to her friends at her Department of Defense school. She is now in a new place, living with her grandmother that she doesn't know very well, and attending a public school, where she does not know anyone. She has never attended a school where the majority of students do not have a parent in the military. In fact, there is no one in her class who has a parent in the military. Jenny's mother is also struggling with the death. She frequently cries and sleeps during the day. Jenny was once a happy, social child, but now she has become very clingy to her mother and is afraid to go to school, stating that something is wrong with her mom and feeling worried that she might also die while Jenny is at school. Additionally, Jenny is experiencing frequent nightmares. Jenny's school counselor recommends to the mother that the family receive bereavement counseling and gives the mother referral information.

The counselor determines that Jenny is experiencing several losses including her father, her friends at her previous school, her home and life that she had in Germany, and the support and close relationship she once had with her mother. Emotionally, Jenny is experiencing fear, sadness, guilt, and loneliness. Additionally, she is experiencing an emotional separation from her mother, despite her mother's physical presence. In regards to a cognitive response, Jenny appears to be gradually developing abstract thinking. She reports knowing that her father will not be returning, having an understanding that death is irreversible. Behaviorally, Jenny has regressed by becoming clingy towards her mother and withdrawing from others, expressing that she does not want to interact with other children.

The counselor begins working with Jenny individually and also arranges for a coworker to work with Jenny's mother individually. Additionally, the counselor invites Jenny and her mother to come to support groups sponsored by the counselor's agency. The mother expresses interest in attending the parents' support group and the grandmother also agrees to attend the group. After some discussion, Jenny agrees to attend the children's support group. Individually, the counselor focuses on developing a relationship with Jenny and then focusing on identifying her feelings related to her losses and assists her with developing healthy ways to cope with these feelings. The counselor involves Jenny's mother in sessions with Jenny to promote communication and discussions about the death and other losses experienced by Jenny. Additionally, the

counselor assists Jenny in planning a good-bye ceremony for her father and involves the mother and grandmother in this process.

Despite the continued difficulty with coping with the losses, Jenny and her mother begin to experience some positive gains. Jenny gradually begins to adjust to her new home and school. Her mother becomes aware of her own emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the death of her husband and how these responses impact Jenny. Additionally, she becomes aware of Jenny's responses to the death and the other losses. She becomes more comfortable talking with Jenny about her feelings, the grandmother continues to provide support and encouragement, and the family continues to attend the grief support groups. Furthermore, the counselor assists the mother in connecting with a support group specifically created for military families.

### **Conclusion**

Experiencing the deployment or death of a military parent is difficult for children and adolescents. Some similarities may exist between military families and other children and adolescents experience grief and loss issues. However, it remains important to not ignore the uniqueness of working with this population. Therefore, counselors may seek assistance from military resources to identify and focus on the issues specific to this population.

Counselors, caregivers, and other supportive adults may assist military children and adolescents in developing healthy ways to cope with their grief and loss issues. Considering Kubler-Ross' stages of grief and loss and the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses of children and adolescents is useful in this process. Thus, the counselor focuses on the specific needs of all clients, helping them develop healthy ways to cope with their specific grief and loss issues.

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