

stay connected to your child, watch him play, sit nearby when he eats, let him sit on your lap, tell him you love him. Try to join your child in some activities he enjoys. This may spark some feelings of pleasure.

If You Are a Partner or Spouse

- **Give your Service member time before handing over child care responsibilities.** Although you may be eager for a break from handling everything on the home front, your Service member needs time to get used to being at home and being a parent again.
- **Share with her caregivers information about what your family is coping with.** This will help caregivers be more sensitive to her and understand any behavior changes in context of current family circumstances.

Keep Your Child Safe

Everyday behaviors of babies and toddlers can evoke strong feelings and reactions from adults, even in the best of situations. A child's crying or sudden move to chase the family cat can lead to an overreaction by a Service member who is not sleeping well or is easily startled. According to the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, anger and aggression are common combat stress reactions. Using alcohol or drugs as a way to cope can make the situation worse and possibly unsafe for family members.

Here are some ways to keep your child safe:

- **Identify people who are your support network.** Post their phone numbers in a place where you can easily find them.
- **If your child's crying or other behavior is too much to take, place your child in a safe place, such as her crib.** Call someone from your support network to help you feel calm and/or come and get your child for a while.
- **Have a safety plan in place to give the Service member or spouse a needed break.** Arrange a signal or cue so that the other parent can take your child(ren) to another location.
- **If at any time you think you or your child may be in danger, take your child and leave your home immediately.** Contact the Family Advocacy Program on your installation for information and resources to support you and your family.

- **Enlist the support of family members and friends your child knows and trusts.** They can be a fresh supply of energy, patience, and humor when yours is running on empty. They may also be able to babysit, giving both of you time you may need for yourselves or to be together.
- **Watch for signs that your child's behavior may be upsetting your Service member.** Even in the best of times, young children stir up deep feelings. A child's clinging or calling "Mommy" repeatedly might feel extremely demanding to a parent who is shutting down emotionally. A child's natural exuberance can lead to an overreaction by a parent who is not sleeping well or is easily startled.

To Do Together as a Family

- **Stick to your family's daily routines, the best you can.** This gives your child structure and a sense of security and confidence that comes with knowing what to expect.
- **Tell your child what is happening in simple words.** "Daddy loves playing with you, but he's too tired right now. I know that makes you sad, but he can read a book to you later."
- **Give your child words for feelings.** "I know it feels scary to hear Mommy yelling. She is upset and having a hard time. She's going to take a walk to calm down and feel better."

Resources

Wounded Warrior

www.woundedwarriorresourcecenter.com offers wounded Service members and their families information about military facilities, health care services, and benefits.

Mental Health Self-Assessment Program

www.militarymentalhealth.com is an online, completely anonymous, and voluntary self-assessment tool that provides information about a Service member's symptoms and concerns. It also provides guidance as to where he or she may seek assistance. The program is not intended to offer a diagnosis.

ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE's mission is to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers. The military webpage supports military professionals and parents with postings of monthly articles, information, and events at www.zerotothree.org/military.

Sources

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ZERO TO THREE gratefully acknowledges The Florida BrAlve Fund administered by The Community Foundation in Jacksonville for its support of Strong Foundations in Pediatric Care.

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National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Taking care of yourself and your baby



Coping When a Parent Is Injured

When a Service member returns home injured, the entire family is affected. It is important that each family member gets the support he or she needs so that the family, as a whole, can stay strong and resilient.

Some injuries are less visible than others. A Service member who has witnessed a traumatic event in combat may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and may have difficulties adapting to routine home activities. This is not a result of weakness. Even the strongest, most experienced Service members suffer stress injuries.

While your baby or toddler can't understand the details of her parent's injury, she is aware that something has changed about her mother or father. She also picks up on the feelings of the noninjured parent, such as sadness, worry, and anger. These changes can leave her feeling uncertain or insecure. She looks to you for comfort and to help her understand and cope with her feelings.

Taking Care of Yourself

In order to take good care of your child, it is important to take care of yourself. Your baby or toddler can sense when you are upset, on edge, or just plain exhausted. This means that it's very important for all adult family members (injured and noninjured) to tune in to and manage their own feelings during this difficult time.

I needed to take care of myself first before I could be a good husband and dad. I didn't like the person I was. I wasn't as loving as I could be. Looking back, maybe it was my heightened anxiety from trauma. I was so scared about our future. —A father

Here are some suggestions in the words of parents dealing with an injury:

- **“Try to take things one day at a time.** It’s hard to do. Everything gets jumbled. But step by step, you can make it.”
- **“Allow yourself to let your feelings out—away from your child.** At the beginning, I had to be positive. But later, there were times I’d walk down the hall to an empty waiting room to cry and scream. It helped.”
- **“Accept support, even if it’s difficult to do.** I’d prefer to handle things on my own. But it helps to have somebody else around, especially when you have a young child. So if people offer support, try to accept it.”

Helping Your Child Cope

When First Getting the News of a Physically Injured Service Member

It’s important to keep in mind that your child can sense your feelings. It’s okay for him to know you are sad or scared. He will feel safe and secure with you when you still take good care of him even though you are hurting.

When your child asks questions, use gentle, clear, uncomplicated words: “Daddy’s leg got hurt. He needs help walking. The doctors are helping his leg get better.” Or, “The

Tuning in to Your Child

Young children tell us a lot about what they are thinking and feeling through their behavior. Watching your child from the outside can help you understand what he is experiencing on the inside. Here are some ways your child may be saying, “I am having a hard time and need more support”:

- Increased clinging, crying, and whining
- Increase in aggressive behavior
- Withdrawal
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Easily frustrated and harder to comfort
- A return to earlier behaviors, such as waking up at night, toileting accidents, and thumb sucking
- Increase of attention-getting behaviors, both positive and negative

bandages on Mommy’s face are helping her burns get better.”

Making Hospital Visits With Your Child

If you decide to take your child to the hospital to visit her injured parent, consider the following:

- Think about the best time to visit. For example, after a nap when she is well rested.
- Tell her what to expect so she has some idea of what she may see, hear, smell, and feel.
- Bring a snack, her “lovey,” and a few toys.
- Help her decide what she might bring for Mommy or Daddy, like a drawing or a book they can read together.



During the visit, it is not uncommon to see your child hesitate before looking at his Daddy or Mommy or shy away from touching, hugging, or kissing him or her:

- Be patient and give him time.
- Show him that it’s okay to hug Daddy or Mommy—if it is. But don’t force him. He’ll cuddle when he’s ready.
- Help him think about ways to connect, like drawing a picture to give to Mommy or Daddy, or singing a favorite song or reading a favorite book together. If your child stares at someone’s scarred face or prosthesis, he’s trying to understand and learn about something that is new to him. He may also be worried that something like that could happen to him.
- Give him a simple explanation and reassurance: “Her leg does look different. Look how it helps her walk.”
- Reassure him that he is safe and healthy; “It’s not the kind of boo-boos that you get.”

Supporting Your Child When a Parent Is Injured

If You Are a Service Member

- **Walk away if you feel you are losing control.** Take a “time out.” If you blow up at family members (or friends), talk with them about it as soon as you can. Let them know how hard you are working to cope.
- **Do small things to show your child that you love him.** Some Service members who have experienced trauma find it difficult to take pleasure in their child. To

Supporting Your Child Once the Injured Parent Is Home

| When I . . . | I may be saying . . . | How you can support me . . . |
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| Protest at being left alone with my parent who has been injured | I need more time to reconnect and to feel safe and secure with him or her. | Don’t force it. Validate my feelings: “It is a change to have Daddy back home.” |
| Pretend that my doll is in the hospital, missing a leg, burned and covered in bandages | I am trying to figure out what is happening. I am trying to get a sense of some control over all that is going on. | Join me in my play. Ask my doll “How are you feeling? Do you have a wheelchair? How can we help you feel better?” Give me props, such as a blanket, toy stethoscope, box of adhesive bandages If you feel worried about my play or feel like I’m getting upset or “stuck” in my play, talk to a professional you trust for guidance |
| Start to watch, smile at, offer toys to, or snuggle with my parent who has been away and injured | I am feeling more safe and comfortable with you. | Give us short times alone together—with the parent who has been home with me nearby and able to step in if we need some support. Help me reconnect by offering me a toy or playing a simple game like peek-a-boo. |
| Show interest, curiosity, or desire to help with caring for my injured parent | I want to help. That makes me feel more in control of getting Mommy or Daddy healthy again. | Give me tasks I can do, such as carry the bandages to the bed. But don’t expect too much. I’m too little for that much responsibility. Protect me from sights and sounds that are overwhelming and scary, such as a wound or bloody gauze. |