

SUPPORTING MILITARY CHILDREN LIVING WITH TERMINAL ILLNESS



Why is it important to give additional support to military families living with terminal illness?

Military children often experience a greater number of changes and transitions in their lifetime. Parents may be reposted several times, with children navigating their long-term absence or the family having to relocate to another town, potentially another country. The impact of this being children having to start new schools, join new extracurricular clubs, say goodbye to old friendships and start new ones.

When a family member is diagnosed with a terminal illness there is often a great deal of change that come with it. Firstly, their loved one will likely be given a medical discharge from the British Armed Forces, meaning a transition back to civilian life. The family will no longer be able to live in their military accommodation and may choose to relocate closer to extended family and support networks. As their family member becomes more unwell there may be greater involvement from medical professionals and carers meaning more unfamiliar people visiting the house. The family will also be coming to terms with the fact that their loved one will die, living with the uncertainty as to when.

All of these changes can have a significant impact on living daily life, both practically and emotionally, with children struggling with their emotional wellbeing, school attendance, concentration in lessons, and relationships with other children and adults.

Talking with military children living with the terminal illness of a family member

Children and young people often choose what they share, who they share with, and when they share. This is true of both sharing the facts about their family member's illness and their feelings about it. They may share some information with friends and not with adults. For some this elicits a sense of control when life feels unstable, there may be some struggles to trust well-meaning enquirers with some defensiveness and the typical response of 'I'm fine' when asked how they are feeling.

They may fear that talking about the death of their family member will make it a reality, holding two opposing thoughts as a coping strategy, knowing that they will die but hopeful that they will get better.



Anticipatory grief

When someone special to a child is dying there can be an expression of anticipatory grief.

Anticipatory grief is similar to the normal process of mourning, but it happens before the actual death. It is in anticipation of the death, beginning to separate and grieve before the person has died.

Often the only thing we can do is offer a space to talk when children are ready, alongside keeping regular contact with parents and carers on how the illness and its treatment is progressing.

When speaking with a child about family member illness, let them take the lead, they may want to share everything with you or maybe just tell you about how they are feeling in that moment. Explore things they think might help, such as counselling or having a timeout card if things feel difficult in class. Be honest, if they ask you a question and you are unsure of the answer, tell them you don't know but will help them find out. Offer to speak with them again, they have trusted you to share their experiences today, knowing that is ok to talk again can offer a sense of safety.

WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE TO THOSE SERVING IN THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES?

Serving personnel can be returned on compassionate grounds in the event of an unexpected death in the family, serious illness or serious family crisis. The Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) is responsible for the management of British Armed Forces casualties and compassionate cases 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

For casualty and compassionate cases contact the JCCC 24/7 telephone helpline 01452 519951



How to support military children living with the terminal illness of a family member

There are five key things you can do to help:

Agency - Acknowledge children's desire to make an active contribution when a family member has a life-limiting illness. They may be actively better behaved and working hard at school in order not to add any additional stress to the family at a challenging time.

Caring - Recognise children's caregiving role and their desire to look after the family when a family member is unwell. They may be taking on additional responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings or additional household chores, without considering themselves to be a young carer.

Trust - Explore children's need to have confidence in the professionals caring for their parent. Healthcare has an impact on all the members of the family, including the children. Children typically prefer healthcare professionals to be more proactive and provide information about their parent's care and treatment in language understandable to them.

Normality - Reinforce children's need to maintain some normality and have respite from the family member's illness. Offer practical support in school attendance and encourage them to continue to attend groups and clubs they enjoy as these improve wellbeing.

Emotions - Support children in expressing how they feel about their family member's illness. The extent of their feelings may not always be shared with others due to fear of the emotional impact it would have upon them such as family members or friends. Offering a space to let these feelings out through play or talking to the child can help.

WHO ARE SCOTTY'S?

Scotty's - the military bereavement charity, supports and empowers anyone affected by military-connected bereavement.

The charity helps children, young people and adults from the British Armed Forces community to have confidence and clarity in navigating their entitlements, the chance to build social connections, the very best mental health and wellbeing support, and outstanding development opportunities.

The STRIDES Programme focuses on education and development needs, removing barriers to learning and helps young people gain confidence that can be lost after a bereavement.

For more information on STRIDES and access further guidance on supporting bereaved military families please go our website scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk or contact welcome@scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk