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NF 91-11

Help Children Cope With Separation and Loss

Adapted by Pat Steffens, Extension Specialist — Human Development and the Family

If you know a child or family who is feeling distress because of separation caused by Operation Desert Storm, you can help. Helping children with their emotions means that we must look at the world through a child's eyes.

Much of what children see and understand is based upon their developmental age. A toddler will not understand the same thing that a five-year-old understands. A 10-year-old will not handle emotions in the same way a teenager can.

Here are some typical childhood emotional responses to loss or separation.

Infants

What a babies feel is not their own distress, but that of their parent or caregiver. If the parent or caregiver is tense or distracted, the baby may react to an adult's tension by becoming dull and unresponsive, irritable or hyperactive.

How Adults Can Help

Provide the infant with a calm, stable environment, keeping the quality of care consistent. If the parent or caregiver is emotionally distressed, provide relief and support. Quiet walks, soft music, warm baths, and other soothing activities are good ideas for both adult and child.

Preschoolers

Preschool children may regress to out-grown behavior — whining, crying, bed wetting or may become more aggressive and demanding. Because preschoolers do not have a real understanding of cause and effect, they may become confused and think that somehow they caused the

parent to leave. Often children will not voice this fear, but they may feel tremendous guilt.

How Adults Can Help

It may be necessary to explain the reason for a parent's departure or separation a number of times. Reassure the child that this situation is not his or her fault. If a child does regress to outgrown behavior, you may want to adjust your expectations and standards somewhat. Whenever possible, simplify your daily schedule. Pay particular attention to basic needs such as sleep, meals and exercise.

Children 6-8

Six to 8-year-olds frequently experience sadness and grief with the loss of or separation from a parent. They often fear for their own safety. Bedtime may be extremely stressful because of their fear that other family members "may leave during the night." They may also feel deprived and show this by clinging or by asking for new possessions.

How Adults Can Help

Help children express their emotions in appropriate ways. Let them know it's okay to feel sad. Show them through your own behavior how to use coping skills to lift the spirits. Try to keep children involved in worthwhile activities. Sports, music and crafts can help focus school-age energies. Children this age often appreciate having an object or possession from the separated parent to keep. Having something touchable and concrete helps to lessen the distance between parent and child.

Children 9-12

Nine to 12-year-olds often feel an overwhelming sense of loss. They can feel pride, embarrassment, anger, and sorrow, all within a relatively short time. Each day can be a roller coaster of emotions — one minute up and another minute down. Children this age may express extreme anger at the parent who left and at close family members left behind. Children may also attempt to hide their feelings in a whirlwind of activities. They may worry about how the separation or loss will affect their future on a practical, day-to-day basis.

How Adults Can Help

Help your child become involved in at least one activity that he or she enjoys and does well. Feeling capable and successful at something gives children a sense of self worth and a sense that, come what may, they have some control over their lives. Children this age often need to talk to someone they can trust outside the immediate family. Anger and fear are strong emotions. Sometimes it's easier to talk about anger and fear with a friend or member of the extended family. Try to identify someone willing to spend time with your child or include that person in some family activities.

Teenagers

Teenagers can understand the reasons for the separation, but they often have limited skills for handling strong, negative emotions. They often distance themselves as a defense against more pain. They may become resentful, feeling that this situation comes when their lives are already difficult enough. Teens may be particularly worried about money and their own immediate future. Many teens will rise to the occasion by taking on responsibilities and providing support for other family members.

How Adults Can Help

Keep communication channels open. Clues about worries or fears often surface during normal family discussion. Try to provide a setting when discussion is natural, such as at family meals. Adults can sometimes help children by talking about a few of their own worries, and say how they are dealing with those concerns. Also give teenagers a few responsibilities to help them feel important and to give them a sense of control during the crisis situation.

Adapted from materials prepared by Lesia Oesterreich, Extension Specialist in Human Development and Family Life, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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