



COMMUNICATION: TALKING WITH YOUR KIDS ABOUT PTSD AND TBI

Military families often face the challenge of reintegration when their service member comes home from deployment. Studies show that challenge intensifies when the service member returns home with a physical or mental injury. Visible injuries like walking with a limp, a prosthetic leg, or a wheelchair present a new challenge for the family but can be more understood by children. “Dad needs a wheelchair now so I can’t jump on his back like I used to” or “after mom’s physical therapy, we can run together again.” However, the unseen injuries such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI) can cause significant distress in the home without proper treatment and positive family communication. Without explanation for their parents’ change of behavior, children may assume “I’m just not a good enough daughter,” “Dad is happier when I’m not here,” or “Mom must not love me anymore.”



“Communication is power. Those who have mastered its effective use can change their own experience of the world and the world’s experience of them. All behavior and feelings find their original roots in some form of communication.”

- Tony Robbins

Common Barriers that prevent positive communication about PTSD or TBI:

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of PTSD or TBI
- Feelings of embarrassment, guilt, or shame
- The notion of “powering through” or “toughing it out”
- Negative perception that PTSD or TBI is a weakness and should be hid from kids
- Fear of reliving it or being triggered while talking about it

What barriers are true for your family?

What could your children gain from breaking those barriers down?



As you prepare yourself to talk about your PTSD or TBI, consider these tips:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">☑ Learn more about the diagnosis. This prepares you to answer questions. But it's okay to say you don't know.☑ Pick a good time and place. Is your child well fed, well rested, & having a good day? Are there no distractions?☑ Consider your child's developmental stage. Most young children can sit still for only a few minutes. Teenagers may not appear to be listening but are. Age and maturity are factors to consider as you choose your words.☑ Use language on their level. Use words they understand and can relate to. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☑ Work together. A partner or another adult provides additional support if you or your child get upset.☑ Avoid too much information. Children don't need the details of the trauma: it can be scary for them.☑ Listen & let them lead. Give a little information then let them ask questions. Their questions act as a guide for what information you share. It also gives them time to process their feelings.☑ Be attentive to their emotions. Pay attention to their expressions. Ask about their feelings and thoughts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☑ Tell them it isn't their fault and tell them again and again. Some kids may blame themselves without ever saying.☑ Tell them you love them. Reassure them of your love no matter how things have changed.☑ Explain, don't excuse. Your child needs to understand what behavior is okay and what isn't. As you explain why behaviors are happening, don't excuse them. Assure your child that you are working on it.☑ Check in regularly. Help them feel emotionally safe in talking to you and bringing up questions. Think of it as a process. |
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Examples of explaining PTSD and TBI to little children:

PTSD: Daddy worked in a dangerous place where he needed to be ready to fight. Now, daddy is home, but his brain has a hard time turning off his "fight button." Daddy is working on feeling safe again and turning off his "fight button."

PTSD: When mom was working, she had to see something bad that hurt her mind (point to your head). This is called PTSD. Mom's PTSD can make it hard for her to calm down from feeling angry or to stop feeling sad. Mommy doesn't want to have PTSD, but she has it. We still love her and she still loves you. We are trying to help her mind get better.

PTSD: Remember when daddy went away for a long time? While he was gone, daddy went through something bad. It gave daddy an owie in his mind that we can't see: we call it PTSD. His PTSD has scrambled up daddy's feelings like scrambled eggs. Daddy still loves you and cares about you, but his owie hurts his mind so bad that his feelings try to shut down, so he doesn't feel so hurt inside. There are doctors that can help with these kinds of invisible owies that daddy is getting help from.

PTSD: Daddy has a boo boo in his mind right now. Let's go in this room until he feels better.



Examples of explaining PTSD and TBI to little children (cont'd):

PTSD: You know how I have been yelling and being mad a lot? I just want you to know buddy that it isn't your fault. I don't like being mad and I don't want to be mad. When I was doing army training, I went through something SUPER tough. It gave me an invisible ouchie called PTSD. Kind of like how you have tummy aches that we can't see but you can feel. We can't see my PTSD, but I can feel it in my mind. My PTSD sometimes makes me want to feel mad and stay mad. It's okay to feel angry sometimes but not okay to stay so mad and yell at you. I want you to know that I love you very much and am working on getting better from the PTSD.

TBI: Daddy hurt his head and needs to go to the hospital. He doesn't feel very good, but the doctors are taking care of him.

TBI: Daddy's brain is hurt. Our brains are like the remote control to the tv. The remote control can turn the tv on or off, make the show louder or softer, or switch to a new show. Daddy's brain tells his body what to do like remote controls tell the tv. Since his brain isn't working quite right, he might be too loud or forget what he needs to do. But daddy still loves you.

Examples of explaining PTSD and TBI to middle and older aged children:

When dad deployed to Afghanistan, he had to go through something bad that was hard for him. Sometimes soldiers, policemen, and firefighters have to see really hard things while keeping us all safe. And many times, seeing this really hard thing can give people something called "posttraumatic stress disorder" but for short, we call it PTSD. It is an invisible injury in his mind that takes time healing.

PTSD can make it hard for dad to relax and feel safe. When someone has PTSD, it can be hard to control emotions in a healthy way, especially anger. You might see dad get upset at little things that are normal. Or he might even explode with his anger. Remember that Dad has PTSD and this is NOT your fault. Dad is working on his PTSD and the anger that comes with it.

When dad was gone, he lost some good battle buddies. It was hard for dad to lose his friends and he feels all mixed up inside from it. This is called posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD for short. Some people with PTSD feel so much pain and anger that they do things to keep them from feeling all their hurt, like napping or being on their phone. Dad still loves you. He is working on his PTSD. Maybe we can all make a list of things we can still do.

Mom has been on edge lately and it isn't your fault. She is struggling with her PTSD. Some days are harder than others, but we want to make a plan for all of us on the hard days. Your well-being is important to us.



Think about your children and their developmental stage. What can each child relate to? How can you foster open communication? What questions might they ask?

Resources

- [How to Talk to Kids About a Parent's Brain Injury or Illness](#)
- [Parenting for Veterans](#)
- [A Veteran's Guide to Talking with Kids About PTSD](#)
- [Understanding Child Trauma and Resilience: For Military Parents and Caregivers](#)
- [Trauma and Your Family](#)
- [Understanding and Talking with Kids About PTSD](#)





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