## Talking to Children about a Military Death by Suicide

Kelly Blasko, Defense Health Agency

When a military loved one dies by suicide, it can be incredibly difficult to know how to support children. Sesame Workshop, with funding support from Defense Health Agency, developed new materials to help military families navigate the complex experience of losing a loved one by suicide. These materials were informed by a qualitative research study consisting of in-depth interviews with surviving military spouses and health care providers who work with military families. The goal of the study was to better understand the experiences of military children ages three to six following the suicide of a caregiver.

Both survivors and providers highlighted the wide range of challenges that families with young children face following the suicide of a caregiver, including posttraumatic stress, stigma or judgment from their friends and acquaintances, and alienation from their religious communities. Additionally, surviving caregivers are often tasked with explaining the concept of death or dying to their children, helping their child express and navigate mixed and confusing emotions about the suicide, and comforting their child through any trauma that they may be struggling with.

Military families, in particular, face another set of unique challenges. They can experience shame and lack of support as a result of the death being thought of as "less honorable" in military communities. Relocation following a suicide death may lead to feelings of exclusion or disconnection from their military community, in turn resulting in isolation from their network of friends and family, as well

as a loss of social support and identity. Survivors also may experience anger or distrust toward the military or their unit, particularly as they absorb the stress associated with line of duty investigations and the implications for their financial futures.

New materials on these topics have been added to the Sesame Street for Military Families: Grief topic page at <a href="https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/grief/">https://sesamestreetformilitaryfamilies.org/topic/grief/</a>.

The resources are intended to support parents, caregivers, and providers in helping children understand and cope, while offering strategies for adults to take care of themselves while grieving. The new resources include a documentary, printable resources page, and topic-specific articles. The documentary highlights the experience of one family who is learning to cope with the death by suicide of their father, as well as a group of military kids and families at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Good Grief camp.

For over a decade, Sesame Workshop has been creating age-appropriate resources and content to support military families and strengthen the resiliency of their young children as they encounter life-changing challenges through its Sesame Street for Military Families (SS4MF) initiative. These resources are housed on the Sesame Street for Military Families website and are also disseminated to families via partner organizations. The resources often cover strategies for addressing difficult topics and life events with young children. Please find all the materials at SesameStreetforMilitaryFamilies.org.

## Talking to Children About a Military Death By Suicide <u>The Need</u>

When a loved one dies, it can be incredibly difficult to know how to support children. But there are strategies and steps you can take to create a space to share, grieve, and celebrate that loved one.

## The Response

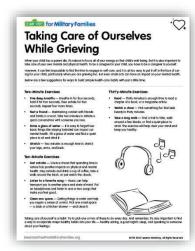
To help military families navigate the complex experience of losing a loved one by suicide, we have added new materials to the <u>Sesame Street for Military Families: Grief</u> topic page. The resources are intended to support parents, caregivers, and providers in helping children understand and cope, while offering strategies for adults to take care of themselves while grieving.

## **New Resources Include:**

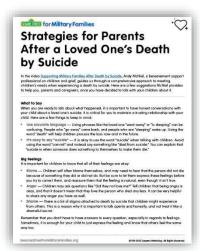
- A Documentary highlighting the experiences of real kids and families at the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Good Grief camp and offering strategies for adults to help children honor their special person.
- Printable Resources Pages that offer self-care strategies for adults while grieving and suggestions for talking to children about the difficult topic.
- Articles to help caregivers stay connected to the military community while grieving and communicating with children after a suicide.



Supporting Military Families
After Death by Suicide



Taking Care of Ourselves While Grieving



Strategies for Parents After a Loved One's Death by Suicide

