



A Veteran's Guide

to Talking With Kids About PTSD



Mental Illness Research,
Education & Clinical Center

**Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D.,
Kristy Straits-Troster, Ph.D., ABPP,
Jessica Larsen, Ph.D.,
Jenna Gress-Smith, Ph.D.
August 2015**





Table of Contents

Preface	3
What Do You Enjoy About Parenting?	4
How Can PTSD Affect Families?	6
Should I Tell My Kids About PTSD?	9
How Might I Prepare To Have These Conversations With My Kids?	13
How Might I Approach the Discussion?	14
What Should I Tell My Kids?	15
What Should I Do If I Get Upset When Talking With My Kids About PTSD?	19
What Should I Do If My Child Becomes Upset During the Discussion?	19
How Do I Deal With Questions My Child Asks?	20
How Can I Be an Effective Parent?	21
Final Thoughts	24
Resource List	25

Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the VA South Central (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC). Special thanks to Christopher Erbes, Ph.D., Abigail Gewirtz, Ph.D., Karen Guthrie, M.S.W., Joanne Nicholson, Ph.D., Lillian Stevens, Ph.D., and John Tassej Ph.D., for their invaluable contributions to this project and booklet. We also deeply appreciate the Veterans who courageously shared their experiences with us and provided helpful feedback.

This guide is in the public domain and may be reproduced for clinical use. It is available for download on the South Central MIRECC website: <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/ClinicalEducationProducts.asp>
 For more information: MichelleDSherman2@gmail.com

Preface

This booklet was written to help Veteran parents living with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) talk about their feelings and experiences with their children. It was written by a group of mental health professionals from across the United States, all of whom are committed to supporting Veterans as parents. We humbly provide this booklet, hoping it may be useful to you and your family. It is filled with information and tips, based on what we have learned from working with Veterans, from our research, and from related research done by others around the world.

Scattered throughout the booklet are quotes from Veteran parents who generously shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with us; we thank these men and women for their courage, and hope you find their perspectives to be useful.

Several sections invite you to consider how the information applies to your family. We included some questions and activities that may interest you, and we encourage you to reflect on the topics and jot down your thoughts and feelings. You may also wish to discuss this information with someone you trust, perhaps a partner/spouse, mental health professional, clergy, relative, or close friend.

You are the expert on your child and family! You know your kids best. Each Veteran and his/her family are unique, and what works well for one family may not be helpful for another. So, we encourage you to take this information and personalize it to your family's needs. Take what seems relevant and what works, and don't worry about the rest.

We honor you as a Veteran, thank you for your and your family's service, and commend you for your commitment to strengthening your relationship with your child.



What Do You Enjoy About Parenting? What Are Your Strengths?

Being a good parent is a big job and can be challenging. Children can provide incredible joy, but can also be a source of stress, anxiety, and worry. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed at times, not sure about what to do, or even ashamed about some of your parenting behaviors, know that you're in good company. All parents feel that way sometimes! Parenting involves a wide range of skills and activities, and some are more fun or easier than others. For example, changing dirty diapers, soothing a screaming toddler, or dealing with an angry teen who came home late may not be your favorite parts of parenthood! It's important to remember the things about being a parent that you really enjoy, especially during the hard times. Although this booklet focuses on challenges related to parenting with PTSD, we also want to consider what's working well in your family.

Consider Cory, an Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran and father of three children, ages 3 to 14. His favorite things about being a dad include:

- Shooting hoops at the park with my son
- Watching my kids sleep
- Reading stories at bedtime

What are your favorite things about being a parent? What activities do you enjoy doing with your child? Please list them below. You may wish to keep this booklet handy for times that you feel stressed or want to think of a way to enjoy time with your child.

- _____
- _____
- _____



All parents have unique strengths and abilities. Some parenting activities come easier than others. Your military training and experience have given you skills that work well in parenting. For example, perhaps your ability to be organized, meet deadlines, and stick to schedules helps you support your children with their homework.

Cory tends to feel badly about himself as a parent, sometimes focusing on what is tough for him with his kids because of his PTSD symptoms. However, when he took some time to think about it and talked with his wife, he was able to identify that he's really good as a parent in the following ways:

- ✓ Good sense of humor: I can get my kids smiling and laughing in no time!
- ✓ I've got their back: I will advocate for them if they ever need me, such as at school or on their soccer team.
- ✓ I'm good at keeping routines. I learned in the military the importance of having regular schedules, and know that having predictable routines really helps my kids. Every night before they go to bed, I help them get everything prepared for the next day, which sets all of us up for a good morning and start to the day.
- ✓ I spend time with my kids regularly. Even if it's just playing with the dog or doing video games together, I make it a priority to hang out with them as often as I can.

What are some of the best things you have to offer your kids? What are your strengths as a parent?

✓ _____
 ✓ _____
 ✓ _____
 ✓ _____



Being a good parent can also involve paying attention to your children’s strengths and talents. What do your children do well? What do they especially enjoy?

In the box below, please write your children’s names, ages, and strengths. Then, take a moment and consider how you support each child to further develop his/her strengths.

For example, Cory has a 14-year old son, Luke:

Child’s Name	Age	My Child’s Strengths	How Can I Support My Child?
Luke	14	Great sense of humor Awesome on the soccer field Sweet and playful with his younger siblings	Kick the soccer ball around together in your backyard and attend his games. Buy a subscription to a soccer magazine for Luke. Encourage Luke to help coach elementary school students on the community soccer league.

How Can PTSD Affect Families?

Parenting can be especially challenging when you're managing PTSD. Some days everything may go smoothly, and you feel comfortable being with your kids. You love being a parent and are proud of your children. Other days, however, parenting may be tough, and may you feel overwhelmed by the basic tasks of caring for your children's needs.

It is normal to feel irritated with your kids sometimes, and you may even find it hard to be around them. Some days your frustration probably has nothing to do with PTSD but is just the normal stress of parenting. On other days, managing your memories and strong feelings related to PTSD makes dealing with your children more challenging. You might feel frustrated with yourself as a parent. Your desire to be a good parent may even be part of what made you want to seek treatment.

"The one main positive in my life is my kids...they are the motivation for everything."

- Male OEF (Afghanistan) Veteran

Although every person's experience of PTSD is different, consider the following situations. You may relate to some of these common parenting challenges associated with PTSD.



Octavia

Octavia is pretty cranky and doesn't have much patience for her kids' misbehavior. She spends a lot of time in her room sleeping, watching TV, playing games on her phone, and reading posts on Facebook. She yells at her kids for little things and then feels guilty later for being so hard on them. Her children hate seeing their mom so tense and mad. They try hard to do well in school, stay out of the way at home, and not do anything to upset her.



Joe

Ever since his deployment to Iraq, Joe has dealt with serious depression related to his PTSD. Just taking care of his daily activities zaps his energy. Doing anything other than relaxing on the couch is overwhelming. His children have noticed that Dad rarely plays with them anymore, so they usually don't ask him to join their activities. They miss the dad that he used to be. He doesn't laugh, joke, and tease with his kids anymore; he seems zoned out much of the time. His kids always go to their mom when they have a problem or need to talk.



Joshua

After ten years in the military as a drill sergeant, Joshua tends to lead his life in a very structured, orderly way. He thinks he parents his young kids just fine, but his wife says he is far too strict and harsh. When Joshua's kids don't follow his orders, his gut reaction is to discipline harshly, even for small misbehaviors. Joshua's wife also thinks he is overprotective; he won't let their children have play dates at other kids' houses. Joshua and his wife have a lot of conflict about how to work together as parents.



Margaret

Ever since being assaulted, Margaret has been very uncomfortable in large groups and crowds. She and her partner typically do their grocery shopping very late at night, or sometimes her 17-year-old son will pick up groceries after school. Margaret was able to sit through one of her daughter's basketball games this season, but being in that loud, crowded gym made her anxiety worse. Recently, Margaret's daughter has been asking to go shopping together for a prom dress. However, Margaret feels anxious even thinking about the idea of walking around a busy mall where so many things could trigger her.



John

John has high levels of anxiety, which makes it hard to relax with his children. When building a Lego fort or playing a board game with his kids, he sometimes feels tense and wants to get away from them. His kids notice his knee shaking and his restlessness, and they feel sad and confused when he stops playing the game halfway through. They wonder if they did something to upset him.



Lexi

Lexi was exposed to a lot of incoming mortar and IED explosions in Iraq, and deals with hypervigilance (being on edge and especially aware of her surroundings) as part of her PTSD. Loud noises startle her, and she works hard to avoid triggers that remind her of Iraq. When Lexi's children make a lot of noise (which is normal for kids) or approach her from behind, she feels panicked and yells at them to calm down. Lexi has noticed that her kids also get upset when they hear loud noises, and she wonders if they learned that from her.



Steve

Steve's wife had their first child during his Afghanistan deployment, and he was very excited to meet and spend time with his new daughter. However, part of Steve's PTSD makes it hard for him to feel any emotions at all; he just feels numb most of the time. Steve doesn't know how to relate to his daughter, and doesn't feel the instant love he thought he would. He wonders, "What's wrong with me as a dad?"

Armando



Armando, a member of the Army National Guard, has really struggled with PTSD since his rescue and recovery work in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. He's turned to alcohol and marijuana to cope with his painful memories and symptoms. He's unable to spend quality time with his children because of his substance use. When he's drunk or high, he isolates himself in the bedroom and won't eat dinner with the family. He knows that he's setting a bad example for his kids, but he isn't sure what else to do and doesn't feel motivated to change.

Do you see yourself in any of these scenarios?

If so, realize that these parenting challenges are quite common when someone is dealing with PTSD. Taking steps to learn about and manage PTSD effectively (such as reading this booklet) will hopefully help you be the kind of parent you want to be.

Should I Tell My Kids About PTSD?

It's up to you, and there is no right or wrong answer. You make the decision as to if, what, when, and how. The fact that you're reading this booklet indicates you're considering the idea. You may have openly discussed PTSD with your child, or perhaps you've never talked about it. Either way, we're glad you're taking the time and energy to think about this important topic. It shows that you are working to be the best parent you can be.

This section of the booklet helps you consider the positive and negative aspects of talking with your children about PTSD, how to prepare for these conversations, how to approach the discussions, and what specific information you might share with your kids.

Children are perceptive. Although they may not be able to fully understand what they see, they usually sense when someone in the family is struggling. It's important for children to know at least a little bit about what is going on. Kids fear what they don't understand and often blame themselves.

As discussed later in this booklet, you decide the extent to which you talk with your children about your experience with PTSD. However, we encourage you to at least explain that parents sometimes have to manage difficult situations, and that you're working hard to deal with some challenges right now. Even just this little piece of information will probably be reassuring for your children.

We recognize that even thinking about discussing PTSD with your children may make you feel anxious. You might try writing out a pros and cons list about talking to your kids about PTSD; doing so can help you sort through your thoughts and feelings.

"Talk to them (kids)...it did me a world of good... because they're understanding a little bit of the way I am."

- Male OIF (Iraq) Veteran



To help you in thinking about talking with your children, consider two fictional Veterans, Marcus and Angela. They weigh the pros and cons of talking to their kids about their PTSD by making a list:

Marcus

PROS	CONS
My kids tend to blame themselves for everything, even little stuff. I wonder if they think they did something wrong to cause me to have PTSD? I'd hate them to worry about that.	I don't even fully understand PTSD myself – how can I explain it to someone else? And I sure don't want to discuss my combat experiences with my kids.
I know my behavior scares my kids sometimes. They just don't understand why I fly off the handle over little things and spend so much time playing video games or watching TV. Maybe they would worry less and understand me more if my wife and I talked to them about PTSD?	I have absolutely no idea what to say to my kids. How would I even start?
Our kids responded pretty well when we talked to them about their grandpa's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. They could tell something was going on with Grandpa and appreciated the information. Maybe this is similar? They are strong kids.	I don't want to burden or upset my kids with this information. It's hard enough being a kid these days without having to worry about me.
	I worry my kids might judge me – they might think I'm weak. After all, I am their dad, and they need to respect me. I'm the man of the house.



"You've got to find a way to communicate with them. No matter how old or young they are, they can have an idea of what you've been through, so it'll help them to understand and have a little more sympathy."

– Male OEF Veteran

Angela

PROS	CONS
I want to have an open, honest relationship with my kids. They deserve to know what's going on.	I never want my kids to know what happened to me when I was in Iraq. It's my job as their mom to protect them from the dangers in the world. How can I explain my symptoms of PTSD without telling them about my assault?
My kids are really perceptive. They know I'm not the same as I was before, but we just don't talk about it. It's like there's this elephant in the living room that no one is talking about.	Talking about my PTSD symptoms is really hard for me. I try to avoid thinking and talking about it as much as I can.
Maybe if I explain PTSD to my kids, they'll better understand why I'm so different and why I act the way I do. It might give them some language to help our family talk about what's going on.	I'm afraid I might cry and that would upset them even more.
Maybe sharing my feelings and PTSD could be a good role model for them about talking about feelings. It might help them feel more comfortable opening up to me in the future.	I worry my kids may tell other people. I don't want anyone outside my immediate family to know – they could think less of me.
By talking about this, I might help my children to develop more compassion and empathy for people who are dealing with emotional issues.	



“I don't want to bring it up; I don't want to relive it. I relive it enough; I don't want to relive it in front of somebody else.”

– Female Veteran

How about you? What would you put on a pros and cons list?
**It may be helpful to take a few minutes to write down your thoughts
and feelings about talking to your children.**



PROS	CONS

We hope this booklet will help you think through some of the items you wrote on this list.

If you decide that you want to talk with your kids about your PTSD, the rest of this booklet provides helpful tips on how to prepare, what to say, and how to manage strong feelings that may come up in such discussions.



How Might I Prepare To Have These Conversations With My Kids?

As you prepare, you may consider:

- What you want to share about your PTSD. You might write down some notes to use during the discussion.
- How much detail to share. Realize this will not be a one-time conversation. Rather, regularly open the discussion, and encourage your children to ask questions and share their feelings.
- If you'd like another adult present. You might develop a plan with your partner, a friend, or family therapist before talking with your kids. Having a trusted adult present can help conversations go more smoothly.
- How you could manage your emotions if you become upset. If you feel overwhelmed, you could do some deep breathing, take a walk, or let your kids know that you need a break but will return soon.



Practice what you will say ahead of time. Doing so may help you feel more confident when you talk with your kids later. You could:

- Practice with a trusted buddy or partner.
- Make a recording of what you want to say. Play it back to see how it sounds, possibly with your smart phone's Voice Recorder function.

Pick a good time. Timing is important when having serious conversations with kids. You might:

- Make sure your child is not especially tired, hungry, sick, grumpy, or having a bad day.
- Schedule the discussion in advance if your child is a teenager so he/she can feel prepared.
- Be open to follow-up questions. After the first conversation, your child may feel more comfortable asking questions when you're doing something else together (such as driving, making dinner together, or working on a project). Talking while doing an activity may feel less threatening and intense.

IMPORTANT

You do not need to tell your children about your trauma to talk about how you're doing now. Some people worry that they cannot tell their kids about their symptoms of PTSD without describing the traumatic event. We disagree.

The decision about IF and HOW MUCH to tell kids about the trauma is complicated and personal. Your child may be aware that you deployed to a combat zone, survived a tornado, or were in a car accident, but know few details. Or, your child may know nothing about your traumatic experience. The child's age at the time of the trauma and the amount of time since the trauma affect his/her understanding. Talk with trusted professionals and friends about disclosing the trauma itself. Regardless of your decision, you **can** talk with your kids about PTSD even if you choose not to share the trauma itself.

"I want to tell them (about my PTSD) because I have unresolved issues...I would not go much into detail about my experiences, but I would tell them that something shocking has occurred in my lifetime...and that's why I get the help that I get now."

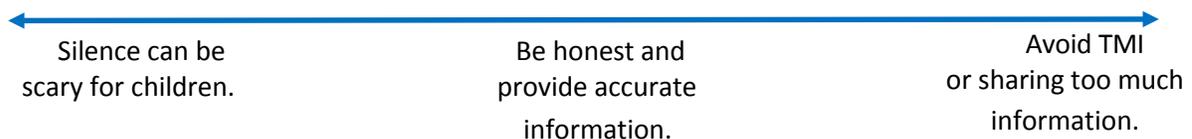
– Male Desert Storm Veteran

How Might I Approach the Discussion?

Knowing how and when to discuss PTSD with children is challenging. The conversations depend on many things – the child’s age and development, your relationship with the child, the timing of the trauma, the nature of the trauma, etc. There’s definitely no right way to have this discussion, and you may develop your own approach.



- **Start slowly.** You’ll likely talk about these issues many times, so you don’t have to cover everything at once.
- **Listen more than you talk.** After you give a little information, allow your child time to ask questions. Following your child’s lead can help the discussion proceed at his/her pace; doing so also helps your child process what is being shared and manage feelings that may arise.
- **Check in regularly.** Throughout the discussion, ask your children what they have heard and understood. Ask how they feel about the information and what questions they may have.
- **Consider the developmental stage of your child.** Young children often have short attention spans, so they may only be able to listen for a few minutes. Teenagers may act like they are not paying attention, even if they’re listening. As you’re sharing this personal information, keep in mind the age and maturity of your child.
- **Use age-appropriate language.** Avoid jargon or technical terms. Phrases like “having a hard time sleeping” and “feeling tense and worried” are much easier for children to understand than words like *insomnia* or *hypervigilance*.
- **Speak in a calm tone of voice.** Try to avoid expressing strong emotions. If you get choked up or overwhelmed, it’s OK to take a break.
- **Find a good balance in how much to share.** Think about the age and maturity of your child. Although some information can be helpful, describing graphic details about upsetting events or showing scary videos can frighten children.



In addition to face-to-face conversations, you may consider writing older children a letter. Some parents have a hard time expressing their thoughts and feelings, and find it easier to do so in writing than in person. Letter writing also allows you to manage strong emotions that may arise without worrying about how they will affect your child. In addition, children can have the letter to re-read many times and think about your message. If you choose to write a letter, you may mention many of the same messages we discuss in this booklet, such as reminding your children that this situation is not their fault and that you want them to feel comfortable asking questions and sharing feelings anytime. You may ask your spouse/partner or another trusted adult to read your letter before giving it to your child; this person could give you feedback on the letter’s content and tone to help make it as comforting as possible. A letter from your heart can be a real gift to your child, both now and in the years ahead.

What Should I Tell My Kids?

Depending on your child's age, he/she may have already learned some things about PTSD. He/she may have talked to friends at school, searched for information on the internet, or read books about it. Although such general information can be helpful, each person's experience of PTSD is different, and there's a lot of inaccurate information written about it. Also, even correct information may not be relevant to your situation. What's important is for your child to understand your symptoms, and hearing something directly from you is the best way for him/her to learn.

Sometimes parents don't know how to begin these conversations. You may find one of these approaches helpful:



I'd like to talk with you about some tough things I'm dealing with right now. Just as I ask you to be open and honest with me, I want to share something personal with you.

I've been dealing with some difficult stuff lately, and I would like to talk with you for a few minutes. How do you feel things are going in our family?

I've been a bit crabby (tense, down, grumpy, etc.) lately. I want to tell you a little bit about what's going on for me.

As you talk with your children about PTSD, you may share some of the messages listed below. How you share the information and what you share depend on your family's situation and your child's developmental stage. Adjust your language to match your child's level of understanding.

Describe PTSD, explaining that it stands for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. About 8% of people in the United States develop it after an upsetting event. It can affect how a person thinks, feels and behaves.

Explain that you experienced an upsetting event but won't be sharing the details.

When I was in Iraq, I had a bad experience that still bothers me today.

A long time ago, I had a really scary thing happen to me. When I think about it, I sometimes feel upset.

I won't be sharing the details with you because talking about this event is hard for me. I'm working on moving forward in my life with you and our family. I hope that knowing about PTSD and how I feel will help you understand me better.

"It [life with PTSD] can be okay; that you can live and have a fulfilling life and have pursuits and dreams and change your life and be okay."

- Female Veteran

Describe some of the problems you manage as part of PTSD, such as

I worry and feel tense a lot. It's hard for me to relax.

I know sometimes I'm crabby and snap at you, even when you didn't do anything wrong. Sometimes my PTSD means I get angry quickly and easily.

Remember when you had the flu and you spent lots of time on the couch? When I don't feel well, I sleep a lot, too. When I don't sleep well at night, I'm extra tired the next day.

Do you remember that I didn't go see the fireworks with the family on the 4th of July? And you know that we don't have balloons at your birthday parties? Some things (like loud noises and fireworks) are hard for me, so I avoid them.

Sometimes I don't go to church with the family on Sundays. I have a hard time in large groups (like at the mall, or at our family reunion). Part of my PTSD is that I feel uncomfortable in big groups.

Share that you know PTSD affects everyone in your family.

Express your feelings about how PTSD has been tough for your child.

I feel badly I haven't been able to attend your baseball games this season. I know it was tough for you when many of the other parents came, but I could not.

I know you sometimes feel embarrassed and confused about why you can't have other kids over to the house to play. All families deal with problems. Sometimes going through tough times can make us stronger. I know it's not the same, but I do enjoy watching you play with your friends at the park.

Emphasize that you really want to be there to support your child.

Just because I've missed some of your events doesn't mean that I don't love you! I love you very much and try to show it in other ways.

My PTSD makes it hard to be in loud gyms and deal with big groups of people. But, I love hearing about the games and watching the videos with you when you get home.



Emphasize that you're all working together as a family to manage this issue.

Just like we all came together when grandma got sick, we can all work together to deal with this in our family. We're a team!

You were so helpful after Mommy had surgery. You picked up your room without being asked and played quietly with your younger brother. No matter who is having a tough time in our family, we all pitch in and help each other.

Let your children know that there are doctors and counselors who can help manage these problems. It's good to be hopeful when talking with children.

Compare managing PTSD to how you deal with other health problems.

PTSD is like many other common health issues, and some of the treatments are similar.

After your sister broke her ankle playing soccer, she went to the doctor, took medicine, and did physical therapy. Managing my PTSD is a lot like that. Sometimes I go to the doctor, take medicines, and attend classes and therapies. Even though I don't have broken bones, I have experienced something really difficult, and it affects how I think, feel, and act. It is taking time for me to heal, but I am getting better.

Explain that you are getting mental health treatment to cope with the PTSD. Although the classes and therapies aren't easy, they teach you skills to better manage your symptoms. Your child may feel reassured and hopeful, knowing that you are getting professional assistance and that effective treatments exist for PTSD. You may let him/her know that it's not going to be this way forever.

Emphasize to your children that they are not to blame for your PTSD.

Your child didn't do anything wrong. He/she did not cause you to have PTSD, and he/she is not responsible for your well-being. Your child cannot "fix" your PTSD, but it helps everyone in the family if your child understands more about it.

"It really isn't them that is an issue...this is me dealing with my time at war. Hey, it's not you guys, it's my PTSD."

- Male OEF (Afghanistan) Veteran



Encourage your children to share their concerns and feelings.

Please come to me whenever you want to talk. I want to hear your feelings and questions, and I will do my best to help you.

There may be times that I'm going through a really rough spell and cannot talk, but there will always be someone to take care of you. When I'm having a difficult time, I know you can always talk to (_____).

In review, you may wish to share the following five messages with your children:

- ✓ PTSD is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. It can affect thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
- ✓ PTSD affects everyone in the family.
- ✓ Doctors and counselors can help our family get through this tough time; we aren't alone! Treatment can help me manage and recover from PTSD.
- ✓ You are not to blame for my PTSD.
- ✓ Please share your feelings with me. I want to support you.



Take a moment to consider your family.

Might you want to share any of these messages with your children?

You might go back through this section and highlight or “star” ideas that you may wish to use in the future.



What Should I Do if I Get Upset When Talking With My Kids About PTSD?

If you start to become overwhelmed and feel strong emotions, you may want to move toward ending the conversation. You might take a brief "time out" and go into another room for a few minutes to calm down. You could take several deep breaths, or talk to a trusted friend or family member.

If another adult is available, you may ask him/her to spend some time with your child. You may decide to engage your child in an enjoyable activity while you take some time for yourself.

When you have regrouped emotionally, it is important to reconnect with your child and let him/her know that you are OK. Explain that everyone (adults and kids) has overwhelming feelings sometimes. You may talk about a time when your child had a strong emotional reaction as an example. Or, you could tell him/her what you do to calm down when you're upset; showing your children that you have people to help you and skills to manage difficult situations can ease their worry. Sharing this reassuring information reminds children that they are not to blame and are not responsible for taking care of you. You may decide to tell your child that you would like to continue the discussion at a later time.

What Should I Do If My Child Becomes Upset During The Discussion?

If your child becomes tearful, quiet, withdrawn, or scared during the discussion, pay attention. He/she is telling you something. What you're sharing may be upsetting, and it's time to check in with him/her.

Tell your child it is OK to have strong feelings, and encourage him/her to express his/her thoughts and feelings. Comfort your child in whatever way feels best for him/her. Young children may like to be held or hugged, while older children may want to do an activity together or have some time alone. This can be a teaching opportunity for your child, as you can talk about helpful ways of coping with strong feelings. You may choose to share some things you find helpful to do when you're upset, such as deep breathing, talking to a trusted friend, or going on a walk. Later on, you may wish to check in with your child about possible reactions to the discussion.



IMPORTANT

Some Veteran parents feel upset when their children cry, even when the tears are because of an injury such as falling off a bike. Simply seeing or hearing your child cry may remind you of your trauma, acting as a trigger. In addition, you may think your child is weak if he/she cries; it may have been ingrained in you while in the military that it's not acceptable to openly express vulnerable emotions. If you are uncomfortable with your child's crying, it may be hard to comfort him/her, and you may be tempted to tell your child to "just get over it." If you relate to these thoughts and feelings, there are strategies you can learn to help you be emotionally present with your children and comfortable with their feelings, both their joys and sadness. While you're improving on these skills, you might ask another adult for help in supporting your child when he/she is distressed.

On the other hand, some children say very little when told important family information. You may even wonder if he/she was listening or understood what you shared. Your child may not want to talk, may appear not to care, and may avoid conversations about the topic. Although we believe providing some basic information and periodic updates is important, respecting children who prefer not to talk to you is important; pushing them to talk usually backfires and results in them shutting down even more. It's good to check in with them once in awhile, but recognize that children may manage their feelings through play, art, sports, or talking with friends.



How Would I Deal With Questions My Child Asks?

A major task of childhood is learning about the world. Children gain information in many ways, including asking questions. Many children are naturally curious and want to know more about their parents. Sometimes these questions can be easy to answer. However, when kids ask about PTSD or traumatic events, Veterans can feel uncomfortable and not know what to say.

Sometimes children ask questions based on things they've seen on TV or in the movies. They may have trouble reconciling what they see in the media with their parent's experience.

Sometimes kids worry and ask questions about your behavior, such as, *Why did you change? Why can't you go to my soccer games anymore? Why are you so angry? Why do you and Mommy argue so much?* If you were deployed to a combat zone, they may ask questions about your experience, such as, *Were you in the war? Did you kill anyone?*

It can be hard to know how to answer these questions, and it's OK to say you don't have all the answers. You can always choose not to answer a child's question if you're not ready, don't know what to say, feel it's bad timing or not appropriate, or aren't sure how he/she will respond.

At other times, children genuinely want to help their parent, but feel unsure and powerless as to what to do. They may ask, *What can I do to help you? How can I make your PTSD go away?* Often children want to help their parent manage emotional issues. Although that desire is admirable, it's important to remind them it's not their job to try to fix you. You have professionals that help you. It's wise to avoid putting your child in a caregiver role or giving him/her too much responsibility. However, you can talk with him/her about small things he/she can do to be helpful, such as:



- Taking out the trash
- Picking up his/her room
- Sending you a sweet text message/email
- Giving you a hug
- Reading you a book or telling you a story

Although giving your children ideas about how to love and support you can be great, remind them that it's not their job to fix you or make your PTSD go away.

How Can I Be An Effective Parent?

This last section provides helpful tips on parenting, many of which apply to all families.

1. Dedicate time and energy to strengthening your relationship with your children.

- Spend a few minutes of one-on-one time with your child everyday, even when you're busy.
- Select an activity you enjoy doing together, like reading a book, riding bikes, or playing a board game.
- Consider how you can nurture your children's strengths. For example, if your child likes math, you may consider playing cribbage or Monopoly.



Write your children's names and ages in the box below. Think about fun activities you have enjoyed in the past or might like doing together now.

Name	Age	Activities Your Child Likes Doing With You
Tyrone	8	Shooting hoops together at the park. Going out for ice cream. Playing backgammon

2. Create and maintain regular family routines and rituals.

Some families involve the kids in making breakfast on Saturday mornings; some enjoy spiritual or religious activities; some have regular bedtime routines. Develop rituals that work for your family, and remember that children are often comforted by predictable schedules and look forward to family activities.



3. Participate in your child's activities.

Even when struggling with depression, anxiety, or other PTSD symptoms, attempt to push yourself to participate in your child's activities, both at home and in the community. Even if you attend for only a short period of time or stand in the back, showing up for your child's activities can mean a lot – and can feel really good for you as a parent as well! If possible, take your own car to an event so you can leave early if you're feeling overwhelmed.

4. Stretch yourself to both give and receive love when interacting with your children.

- Tell your children how special they are to you everyday. You can praise them, remind them of their strengths and talents, tell them you love them, and give hugs and cuddles when appropriate. Even if it feels awkward or unnatural, your children will probably really appreciate your expressions of love.
- Allow yourself to enjoy your children’s love and expressions of affection, even if it may be hard at times. Many children are naturally comfortable giving and receiving love, and you can grow more comfortable being close with practice and effort.



“I give my kids hugs every day...make sure I tell them I love them.”

-- Male OIF (Iraq) Veteran

5. Apologize when appropriate.

Parents with PTSD can experience a lot of anger and may feel guilty about how they handle some situations with their kids.

IMPORTANT

All parents lose their temper at times with their children. Most kids are pretty forgiving. After you’ve calmed down, go to your child and apologize for how you handled the situation. You may wish to express that you are working hard on managing your feelings in a better way, and don’t want to hurt him/her. It can be helpful if you spend some quality time with your child to get your relationship back on track, such as playing a game, going on a walk, or doing a hobby together.

6. Avoid taking your child’s behavior personally.

Some Veterans with PTSD feel like their children do things to annoy them on purpose. For example, John may have asked his daughter to avoid scaring him from behind because such startling behavior is upsetting. When she forgets and jumps on him from behind to play, John thinks she is being defiant and disrespectful. He wonders if his daughter is intentionally trying to trigger his PTSD, asking himself “Why does she keep doing this to me?”

“Once I’m able to calm myself down, I have to go back and apologize and again try and reassure them.”

-- Male OIF (Iraq) Veteran

When parents reflect upon these situations later, they often realize that their kids were just being kids – which can involve forgetting instructions and sometimes failing to follow the rules. John may appreciate that his daughter wanted to play with him, but she had forgotten the rule about not approaching dad from behind. Parents can practice changing their automatic reactions, shifting from assuming the child is intentionally irritating them to accepting the misbehavior as part of childhood/adolescence and using it as a teachable moment.

7. Take good care of yourself.

One of the best things you can do for your children is to take care of your mind, body, and spirit. Specifically, we encourage you to:

- Make time for regular physical exercise.
- Eat a balanced diet, and limit alcohol use.
- Try to get adequate sleep (7-8 hours per night).
- Practice ways to regulate emotions, such as relaxation techniques, deep breathing, prayer/meditation, or yoga.
- Connect with supportive friends and family members. Although exchanging text messages and chatting on Facebook can be great, there's nothing like spending quality time together, even if it's just a short chat over coffee.
- Parenting sometimes means feeling unpopular or even disliked, so get active in your own activities. Maybe take up a hobby you haven't done in many years. Whatever you do, make sure you have people in your life who love and affirm you and can support you in the sometimes challenging journey of parenting.



8. Seek mental health care if needed.

You are being courageous and a good parent when you seek help for yourself! Not only are you improving yourself, you're being a good role model for your child. You may also choose to involve your children in family therapy or classes.

Talk to your mental health care providers about the challenges of parenting with PTSD. Ask for recommendations for resources for your children to help them understand parental PTSD. You may also find the list of books, websites, and mobile apps on the last page of this pamphlet to be helpful.

*"Include your children in the (treatment) process
so they can hear it from a professional..."*

*Having PTSD doesn't make you any less valuable in their eyes.
You're still Mom; you're still Dad. . . they don't walk away feeling sorry for you.
If anything they walk away saying, 'I'm more proud of you today than I ever was.'"*

- Male Desert Storm Veteran

Final Thoughts

Thank you for taking the time and energy to work through this booklet. The fact that you've done so shows your commitment to improving your parenting skills. We hope the booklet has reassured you that you're not alone in dealing with PTSD as a parent, invited you to think about some issues with your parenting, and provided helpful tips for talking with your kids about your symptoms of PTSD.

You may wish to discuss some of the information or your reactions with someone you trust, perhaps a partner/spouse, therapist, family member, or friend. Opening such a conversation may be a good next step in helping you process the information and put the ideas into action in your family.

If you felt distressed or experienced an increase in symptoms when reading this booklet, we strongly encourage you to seek support, perhaps through a professional or someone in your personal support network. Remember that you can always reach out to the Veterans Crisis Hotline via phone, 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text (send message to 838255) or online chat (www.VeteransCrisisLine.net). You may also find supportive resources and enjoy videos of Veterans sharing their experiences on the Make the Connection website (www.MakeTheConnection.net).

Although there isn't much research on Veterans with PTSD regarding parenting, we know that most children grow up to be productive, well-adjusted adults. Further, many military kids later join the military as adults, suggesting that for many of these kids, the good things outweigh the challenges in terms of their parent's service.

There are many effective treatments for PTSD that can help you and your family. We hope that you have or are seeking support so you don't feel alone, overwhelmed, or discouraged. Getting professional help can reassure your children and help you move forward, both individually and as a family.

Although we know that PTSD can make parenting more challenging, it does not mean you or your children will necessarily have difficulties, either now or in future. With support, communication, and commitment to your family, you can minimize the impact of your PTSD symptoms on your child, enjoy being a parent, and enjoy positive relationships with your children.

We wish you the very best on your journey.



Resource List

Books for Children About Parental PTSD

Daddy's Home. Carolina Nadel. (picture book to read to small children).

Sparrow. Dorinda Silver Williams. (board book for young children).

Why is Dad so Mad? Seth Castle. (ages 4-8).

Why is Daddy (Mommy) Like He/She Is? A Book for Kids about PTSD. Patience Mason. (ages 4-8).

Why Are You So Scared? A Child's Book about Parents with PTSD. Beth Andrews. (ages 6-10).

Finding My Way: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has Experienced Trauma. Michelle Sherman & DeAnne Sherman. (ages 12-20).



Parenting Websites

(military-specific and general websites)

Parenting for Service Members and Veterans: <http://militaryparenting.dcoe.mil/>

** Has an accompanying mobile app, Parenting To Go (free from iTunes)

Sesame Street's Talk, Listen Connect series: www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/our-initiatives/military-families/

Talking with Children about TBI (Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center): <https://dvbic.dcoe.mil/material/talking-children-about-tbi>

Veteran Parenting Toolkits: www.ouhsc.edu/vetparenting

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's family page: www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Home.aspx

Center for Effective Parenting: www.parenting-ed.org

Centers for Disease Control's information for parents: www.cdc.gov/parents/

Healthy Children (American Academy of Pediatrics): <https://healthychildren.org>

PBS Parents: www.pbs.org/parents/