

Children & Young People of Armed Forces Families

2022-03-10

Conflict & War: Supporting Armed Forces Families

Subtopic: **Talking to children about what is happening in Ukraine**

Children are aware of the escalating crisis in Ukraine, they sense the tension even if they do not understand the frightening and scary events that are unfolding. Social media and news are full of a constant flow of images and information that can be confusing and bewildering, creating for many a sense of anxiety. It is unlikely that children can be completely sheltered from all of this. Children of Armed Forces Families are often highly tuned to the announcements and decisions made by the UK Government that requires their serving parent to be away on duty. They also have various experiences with their parent being away for regular periods of time for training in preparation for response (operational readiness) and deployments.

It is helpful to remember:

The children and young people of armed forces families, in our Scottish schools, are not serving nor did they choose their parents' role in the British Forces. They are, however, proud that their parent has chosen to serve their country. They are aware that Duty must be first. It is also important to remember that Serving personnel do not decide where they go or when, they respond to the decisions of the UK Government and the commands of their service, Royal Navy/Royal Marines, British Army, and Royal Air Force.

Children and young people of armed forces families may be looking at the events in Ukraine from a perspective that is different than children of non-military families. They are aware that when issues of Defence and Security arise, their parent (or someone known to them) may well become involved. Issues of conflict and war become closer, and impact family and home. There is much that is unknown around the unfolding world events, and the uncertainty can be stressful for many.

If a child is obviously stressed/distressed by all of this, then there needs to be a close and careful partnership with the home to ensure consistency of message.

Key points to remember when speaking with an armed forces child:

Be honest and factual, do not make promises.

Suggested comments when speaking with an armed forces child:

"I can see you are worried. I find it worrying too."

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“I know it is difficult to wait and to be uncertain of what will happen, and not knowing if your father/mother might be required to serve.” (be sent out there, provide support, be involved)

“I will listen if you want to tell me about it.” “I am here, and I am a good listener.”

“Your father/mother¹ (dad/mum) has been well trained and will do their job the best they can.”

“Your father/mother has others around them who are well trained and will do everything they can to keep each other safe.”

... Something might be said about worrying with them ... doing something together, making something for the parent (to acknowledge they are thinking of them).

Educators have a wealth of knowledge and experience in interaction with children and in providing support when needed.

As educators we learned a good deal from children and their families during the period of conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is important to remember that deployments are continuing, to Iraq and other areas of conflict world-wide, even though there is no longer direct media coverage.

During the height of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, when there were images circulated by the media daily, we learned to ‘*be there*’ for the children of armed forces families and their parents. We learned to focus less on due dates of assignments, on homework, on lists and schedules; we focused more on people and the here-and-now. We recognised the value of taking time to ‘check-in’ on feelings, to provide breathers (from daily routines and expectations), to take breaks, and to be attentive. We tried to be more flexible in our approach, in our engagement and in arrangements. It is helpful to remember that armed forces families continue to have their loved ones sent to areas of danger, and they continue to worry about them.

Our experience with COVID-19 too has provided lessons in shifting priorities (to be more flexible when needed or necessary), renewing a focus on people (aware of those around us and those far away); and the value of listening, empathizing, and understanding.

Suggestions for consideration:

Do not force/expect children to talk if they don’t want to but to be alert to any possible changes in their mood/ behaviour.

¹ A sibling could also be serving in the armed forces

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Invite the child to talk, play or draw/write – offer an opportunity to express feelings/thoughts

Take time and Listen

Use appropriate language at the level of the child (take your cues from them)

An armed forces family may wish to deal with the sharing of information in a particular manner. If possible and appropriate, have a conversation with the parent(s) so that you can support them.

Be aware that peers (children of non-military families) are affected by the worry and anxiety of their armed forces friends. The waiting, the unknown, and the lack of any control/voice over what will transpire that requires a parent to assume a role in a conflict zone or war, is stressful.

Secondary School

Staff need to be aware that there may be children of armed forces families in their class/group or even within hearing distance of a conversation around the current and unfolding situation in Ukraine. Opinions expressed about what the UK military should or should not be doing in this (or any other) conflict can impact on the child, yet they have no control over these decisions that directly affect their serving parent.

Secondary schools, especially in a subject area such as modern studies, may wish to deal with the war in Ukraine in lessons. It is important for teachers and staff to be aware of Armed Forces pupils in their classes and be very sensitive to the issues raised in this document. Likewise, schools will need to be mindful of their Russian and Ukrainian pupils, as there will be sensitivities and tensions.

In educational settings decision-making, voicing opinions and judgements is encouraged, yet there are times when the degree of application of these skills needs to be considered, and may present a challenging contrast to the life situation experienced by armed forces families and their children. Decisions made by the government do directly impact armed forces families. Serving personnel are not free to voice opinions on decisions of military action or involvement. Voicing opinions that do not sit comfortably with orders to be undertaken by the armed forces can raise tensions within a household and put strain on family members. There can be palpable tension between what a serving parent must do and what family members think is a preferred course of action.

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Regardless of how many times the parent has been away on training or deployment, the separation from a close loved-one does not get easier, especially when the situation has constant media coverage. This is exacerbated when there are numerous reports of conflicting information from some sectors, the accuracy of which is questionable. Sorting out the 'news' is a challenge for adults, and it can be overwhelming for children and young people.

Above all, children of armed forces families are fundamentally proud that their parent(s) have made a commitment to serve their country and provide defense and security for its people at-home and abroad. Pride does not replace worry and anxiety, nor the fact that serving personnel must put 'Duty First', respond to military orders, and fulfill decisions made by the UK government.

It might be helpful to consider, *the Serving Personnel responds, the armed forces family members serve as lynchpins to home.*

I hope that some of this might be useful to raise awareness in supporting armed forces children around conflict and war.

Carolyn MacLeod
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10th March 2022