Supporting Children of Deployed Families

Read the following scenarios. Describe what you would say and do to support the children and families.

1. Cassie is an 11-year-old child in your school-age program. Her mother, Cleo, is preparing for a mission to Afghanistan. Due to the nature of Cleo's work, it is unknown when exactly she will leave for the mission, when she will return, and where she will be located throughout the tour of duty. It is unlikely that she will be able to communicate with her family while she is on duty: no news will be good news. During Cleo’s last deployment, Cassie had a difficult time. She regressed in some skills, like her self-reading, and she did not speak to anyone every time her grandmother dropped her off at the school-age program in the morning. She was distant and fearful throughout the deployment. How can you help Cassie, Cleo, and their family prepare for this deployment?

   Encourage Cleo to begin talking with Cassie about the upcoming separation. Give the family ideas they can use to prepare for the deployment. For example, they can begin finding ways for Cleo to stay involved in daily routines: Cleo could make a recording of several of Cassie’s favorite stories or songs; Cleo could make a pillow out of one of her t-shirts for Cassie to sleep with; she could leave messages or notes for the school-age program staff to share with Cassie at regular intervals; they could develop family traditions like looking at the stars and talking to one another. You can also encourage Cassie’s grandmother to get involved in the school-age program and to begin spending time on a consistent basis and opening lines of communication. You can create personalized stories for Cassie to read about mom’s deployment and what happens while she’s away; you can include reminders about the routines at home and school that have been difficult for Cassie.

2. Your supervisor calls you at home to let you know she just heard some terrible news: 8-year-old DaVonte’s mother was killed in a car accident while coming home from work. DaVonte’s father, who has been deployed for the past two months, has been informed and is returning home as quickly as possible. How can you help support this family through this difficult time? What do you think DaVonte will need when he returns to school and your program? What words will you use to talk about the accident and his mother? What supports will DaVonte’s father need as he reintegrates into home and work? What military or community resources do you think DaVonte and his father will need?

   First, make sure DaVonte’s immediate needs are taken care of: he has other immediate family who can care for him until his father returns home. When DaVonte returns to the program, follow his lead about when and how to talk about his mother. Give him the opportunity to tell his story.
DaVonte may ask some questions. Be honest about his mother; avoid using phrases he may not understand (or that aren’t true) like “you lost your mom” or “she passed way.” It’s ok to use words like “died” or “killed.” Give him opportunities to remember his mother; it’s ok to use his mother’s name and to talk about what you remember of his mother. Be prepared that DaVonte may struggle with why his mother died and may feel like it’s his fault. Be respectful of his grieving process: he may or may not cry, he may want to be very busy, or he may become clingy. Listen when he talks and reflect back what you hear without judgment. Ask open-ended questions. Also remember that DaVonte needs to have fun and play—just like any other child.

Help DaVonte’s father understand the stages of grief. Connect him with family advocates and grief counselors. Be thoughtful, sensitive, and supportive as DaVonte’s father handles the financial, social, and emotional implications of the death.

3. Lilly has a 6-year-old daughter, Sam, in your program, and a 4-month-old son, Toby, at the child development center. Lilly is going on a one-week TDY to San Antonio. She has never left her children before and is very nervous about the trip. Lilly admits she is concerned about being able to continue to breastfeed Toby, help prepare Sam for the trip, and leave her husband home alone with two young children for a week. Every morning Sam wakes up and asks if mommy is leaving today. When Lilly began packing her suitcase, Sam pulled out items as quickly as Lilly could put them in. Lilly tells you that she and her husband have been fighting quite a bit since she learned about the trip. Her husband thinks she’s making too big of a deal out of the trip, and Sam is feeding off of Lilly’s anxiety. Lilly thinks she needs to prepare her daughter for the trip. What could you do to help this family?

Recognize and value Lilly’s commitment to preparing for her separation. Support her as she expresses and stores breast milk. Encourage her to visit Toby as often as she needs to in the time before her TDY to breastfeed Toby and maximize her milk production and storage. Encourage Lilly and her husband to follow Sam’s lead: she is curious and anxious about the separation and is asking for more information. Perhaps the family could create a calendar. Involve Sam in the trip: the family can research San Antonio so Sam can learn about where her mom will be. Make plans for maintaining communication via phone calls or Skype.