

THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

Have you ever had the experience of looking for something you have lost and becoming so agitated that you almost forgot what it was you were looking for? For a very young child, the absence of a parent is often similar. The child is only aware of a feeling of unease and discontent without really linking it with the fact that daddy is not at home. Remember also how long the summer holidays felt when you were a child, a week for us can seem like a month to them.

As children get older they will probably have some similar feelings but will be able to think about them and reflect a little. For the 7, 8 and 9 year old, this sometimes leads to some very unusual ideas, they may remember an argument before Dad left and somehow blame themselves for his leaving. They also often have very unrealistic fears and worries at this sort of age.

As children move into teenage years they obviously have an even greater ability to think about their feelings and experience and make sense of them. What they very often are not good at doing, however, is sharing worries and feelings even with those very close to them. The level of worry may be increased if the parent has gone to an area of conflict especially if it is frequently mentioned in the news.

HOW DO WE RECOGNISE STRESS IN CHILDREN ?

Children usually show their stress or anxiety in the way that their behaviour changes. There can be a whole range of behaviours which may change and could indicate that your child is stressed. These also to some extent vary with age:

Pre-School Age:

- More clinging – to people and/or objects such as a comforter or toy.
- More crying.
- More wanting to be with adults rather than other children.
- More aggressiveness towards people and/or things.
- More withdrawn.
- May act out worries through their play in a way that you find distressing.

School Age:

- All of the above.
- More complaints of aches and pains, especially in the head and tummy without apparent physical cause.
- More irritable and lacking in concentration.
- More problems at school.

Obviously, a minor or brief change in any of the above is not going to give you cause for concern, but where there is a persistent and obvious change in behaviour in at least one respect then you will probably need to help in some way.

HOW TO HELP

Two important things to consider in helping are:

1. That your children may be picking up on and responding to your feelings. It is likely you will be feeling more stressed when coping with the family on your own but do try to reflect on ways of maintaining your own sense of confidence and self-control.
2. An important factor to consider is that frequently, when stressed, children will begin to regress. In other words they will want to go back to a stage of development which would be typical of when they were a little younger. Sometimes simply recognising this and accepting it can be quite sufficient to overcome the difficulty.

Here are a few ideas, which may be helpful.

1. **Maintain your usual routine.** Keep to usual rules and expectations and ways of enforcing them. Children need stability. This also avoids problems of readjustment when dad comes home. Do not threaten children with what will happen “when your father gets back”. Never say, “if you don’t behave yourself daddy won’t come back”.
2. **Be tolerant and understanding of changes in your child’s behaviour.** But, being understanding does not mean allowing them to get away with behaviour you find intolerable, or becoming overindulgent and showering them with treats and presents in an attempt to make them happier. If you are generally firm it will make them even more disoriented if you change your attitude.
3. **Be honest and share feelings.** Your child will be aware of your stress even when you try to hide it. They will find it easier if you can say why you are snappier, or quieter, or sadder than usual. Do not lie about where dad is – it is better if you tell them than they hear it from other

children. Also it is confusing if a child has anxiety around them but is told that everything is normal. Reassure them, but do not give false reassurance. Explain things to them in simple terms and try to answer their questions, but protect them from frightening news reports.

4. **Reassure them of your love and support, and of their father's.** Some children may not understand that dad has to be away and can feel abandoned, unloved and unimportant, or even sometimes that they have driven him away. Physical reassurance is important. Make opportunities for cuddles, hugs and being close.
5. **Encourage them to talk.** Sometimes it can be hard to find a way in. Direct questions such as “what’s wrong?” are rarely successful. Try instead to talk to the feeling lying underneath what the child has said or done.

You might need to take a guess at this, or it may be obvious. For example, instead of saying to your crying child “what’s up?”, comment that they are feeling sad at the moment.

If your child tells you about their feelings or about something that has happened to them, do not say “cheer up” or “never mind”, use the opportunity to talk to them further.

Some ways of opening up communications when this is difficult are:

With younger children, talk via a teddy or doll at bedtime, e.g. “Teddy’s looking a bit sad/fed up. What do you think happened today?”.

With older children it can help to talk about a time when they were younger. You can also have end of the day “conversation games” such as saying “one thing I liked about today was...”, “one thing I did not like about today was...”.

The most important thing is to provide the time and space for your child to talk to you and to listen to them when they do. Often bathtimes and bedtimes are when you can give your child a bit of quiet attention.

6. **Keep in touch with dad.** Letters, drawings, tapes, etc are very important. Some children like to carry a photo of dad around with them, or will treasure some little thing dad sends them from abroad. Talk about dad, keep him a part of everyday life.
7. **Manage your own stress.** Do not pretend you are not affected. Your children will cope better if they understand you are having difficulty too. But at the same time do not overburden them with your emotions, worries or fears – seek as much support as you can get from others. Do not expect your child to fill the gap. Have realistic expectations of them, and try and be specific in what you ask of them.

Little (and bigger) boys who are told they are now the “man of the family” may be overwhelmed and confused as to what this really means. Better to explain there are one or two things that maybe dad usually does that they can perform in his absence. Similarly instead of telling a child they must be “very very good all the time dad’s away”, (after all, no child can be perfect for months on end!), suggest something particular they might try hard on, e.g. “help mummy by putting away your toys every evening”.

HANDLING SOME SPECIFIC BEHAVIOUR CHANGES

1. **Aggression.** One of the most important things to do is to try to remain calm and in control of the situation. With verbally aggressive behaviour it may be best to try and ignore the behaviour at the time. With physical aggression it is important, both for the welfare of other people and objects, and indeed for the child themselves, to remove them and physically calmly control their behaviour. With younger children, taking them to a specific place for a “time out” can be very effective. Make sure that the child does not become too distressed or frightened that they are themselves losing control.

In general, you should try and identify what it is that you would like the child to do, i.e. if he is aggressive towards his little sister, then try to reward through, e.g. praise or physical affection, short periods when he plays sensibly and appropriately with her.

With older children, try to understand some of the underlying reasons by encouraging the child to talk to you as discussed elsewhere.

2. **Tearfulness.** In general, reassure the child that tears are “okay”. If you think it is becoming a habit try to explain that they should also develop some self control. There is a danger that the child becomes more tearful because they receive a lot of adult attention by so doing.

Give a good deal of cuddling and physical affection but try to give it not only when the child is being tearful.

With the younger child distracting them into different behaviour or thoughts is often a good strategy, e.g. to think of something nice or to engage them in some play.

Again, for older children communication is crucial.

3. **Bedwetting.** For a child who has been dry for some time, embarrassment is frequent and they will need reassurance and comfort. Lifting can be helpful.

For younger children a simple chart with sticky self-adhesive pictures will often be helpful. Be wary of allowing the younger child to come and

share your bed if they have wet theirs, (not just for the obvious reasons!).

For older children similar incentives can be used and it is important to talk the problem through with them to build their confidence. To reduce embarrassment the introduction of simple routines for example, changing sheets can be built in for the child to carry out.

4. **Clingy babyish behaviour.** Generally try to make the child feel secure, loved and comforted by increased physical contact and longer bedtime routines with shared time. If the child is very whiny it is difficult to remain calm but if at all possible you should try to do so.

Do not simply react to the clinging babyish behaviour by immediately providing comfort as again the child may tend to be therefore encouraged to become clingy in order to get comfort from you. A simple comforter of a photograph or some simple object can be helpful and reassuring to the child.

For older children communication is again crucial and bedtimes or bathtimes are often a good relaxed time when you are both able to share feelings. Even if the child has not had bedtime stories for some time it is often a good idea to return to this simple routine.

5. **Sleep problems.** Decide on some simple rules and routines with your child, e.g. bedtimes, reading times, what you will do if they wake during the night, when they may come in to see you in the morning etc. Build in some time for calm affectionate contact and in general try to avoid stimulation just before bedtime from such things as television.

Simple things such as night lights and soft music played at bedtime can often be helpful.

If the child is disturbed by dreams then do encourage them to talk them through as they may have a rather unusual or frightening content to the child which will be dispelled by sharing it with you.

6. **Withdrawn behaviour.** Allow lots of opportunity for physical contact, touching, cuddles and in the case of an older child allow some opportunity to return to an earlier stage in the development by perhaps lying next to them at bedtime to allow “space” to share feelings.

Try to find opportunity to play alongside and to “be a child again”. Being very silly together can be a valuable means of releasing feelings and opening up communication. Use of puppets and other toys can be very helpful, sometimes a child will talk “through a puppet” in ways that they would not directly.

Drawings can help. Do not expect the child to fully understand the meaning of what they have drawn though it may give you some pointers as to where some concerns or difficulties lie.

If the child has become rather withdrawn from other children then try inviting some other children to your home.

For older children, putting their thoughts into a diary, which they may or may not wish to share with you, can be useful. Encouraging completely private letters or cassette tapes to be sent to father can help.

Remember as a parent you will already have dealt successfully with many of these things in the past. Take time to be in touch with your own strengths and capabilities.

WHEN AND WHERE TO SEEK FURTHER HELP

Do not be reluctant to approach your Health Visitor, GP, child's teacher, or padre to talk over difficulties.

Sometimes a chat (or several!!) will be enough to reassure you that you are going in the right direction. They can also offer advice when you feel stuck or overwhelmed with a problem.

If you or they feel further help is needed, you can be put in touch with an appropriate professional, e.g. your local Child Guidance personnel, SSAFA Forces Help RAF (UK) Social Work Service Staff, Army Welfare Service, or British Forces Social Worker will be able to work on the problem with you.