

Create a Space to Openly Talk About Tough Topics

When serving and protecting, the U.S. military mission is creating safety for our country and the world. Parents of military families are key to the safety in their home and child’s life — physical and emotional safety are key to building resilient children and families.

This tip sheet is designed for parents and caregivers to facilitate creating safe environments within the home, and where tough but needed conversations and learning can occur between children and caregivers about those topics.

Create an environment where young people feel confident to ask questions about their feelings, relationships, bodies and experiences to facilitate good decisions now and into the future.

“When my parents talk to us about sex, relationships, what was going on with our bodies, I could tell it was uncomfortable for them, but because they did it, I know the topic was important to them, so it became important to me, and I listened.” — Anonymous

Caregivers can create a space to openly talk about tough topics

- **Give children a seat at the table** — Allow young people to be full participants in family conversations. Ask them what their feelings and thoughts are, and explain that they are key contributors to the decision-making process. This will allow them to feel secure in sharing their own thoughts and asking questions.
- **Be calm and open** — One of the biggest barriers to needed conversations is fear of a caregiver’s reaction. Creating a space where both parties can be calm is key to reducing this fear.
- **Ask for permission to have a conversation** — These topics can feel overwhelming. When asking permission, you’re empowering a young person to be a part of the conversation. When giving permission, you’re opening the door to having the conversation and for them to ask meaningful questions.
- **Recognize and respect each other’s perspective** — Each person has different views, experiences and understandings. It’s important to recognize and respect every level of understanding. When someone feels respected, learning and listening occurs.
- **Set an example** — The best way for young people to learn is by following the example you set. Share your own thoughts and feelings, encourage asking questions and expressing concerns — and celebrate when they do and when you see the behavior you want to see.

“My parents made us a priority and we understood we could come to them if we ever felt unsafe or had questions. These talks about asking questions and feeling safe happened a lot and I know our safety and feelings were a priority to them.” — Anonymous

Avoid roadblocks when implementing new strategies

In a traditional sense, strength and bravery exclude feelings of vulnerability. Facing and understanding these issues takes strength and bravery to navigate.

Regardless of your role in the family unit or the role you play in a young person's life, vulnerability is essential to having conversations about tough topics. Recognize the strength and bravery of a young person and your own in these moments.

Roadblocks to avoid

- **Coming off as judgmental** — When it comes to topics that need honest discussions, young people are very sensitive to judgment. You can avoid judgment by seeking to understand their feelings and where they are coming from.
- **Interrupting and problem solving** — Because adults have conquered adolescence, it's easy to give the answers to what a youth needs. However, many times when facing challenges youth are not looking for solutions. They really want you to just listen and be present with them. This is easy to do by not interrupting when they speak.
- **Time and location** — Recognize that when you're ready to talk, they may not be ready. The opposite can also be true, that when they want to talk, it may not be an ideal time or location for you. Plan with them a time and location that is suitable and safe to have meaningful conversations. Youth will often come more prepared when they know what to expect.
- **Not wanting to get in trouble** — Youth never want to get themselves or someone they care about in trouble. There are consequences to actions, but a young person should always feel safe enough and supported enough to tell the truth.
- **Don't underestimate your role** — Youth crave acceptance and understanding from the adults in their life, especially their caregivers. Regardless of the role you play in a young person's life, the closer you are the bigger influence you can have. Don't underestimate the impact you can have. Acknowledging a youth's progress and strengths can go a long way.

"Self-reliance and independence is a huge value in our community and it's a value I will always be grateful that was instilled into me." — Anonymous

Psychological safe homes means directly addressing family's mental health and sexual health

In military culture, our lives often live in separate “compartments” (e.g., school, work, extracurriculars, deployments, etc.). This is a tool that can be used to our advantage. Sexual health and mental health intersect in all compartments and can be integrated into multiple conversations.

Resilience and pushing through challenges to accomplish the objective defines our military culture, but it can be misunderstood as pushing through by ignoring personal or family challenges that require our attention and courage to address.

One solution is learning vulnerability's value in these conversations. Being authentic and open takes a lot of courage, and military culture has made sure everyone feels experienced in practicing courage.

Raise the family as first to the mission

When service members swear in, they're not the only ones making an oath to serve and protect. The mission of the U.S. military extends far beyond its immediate enlisted members. Families are continuously supportive of the mission.

With this, there are many experiences military families face that are uncontrollable. Deployments, changing station posts and entering new communities can shake up a family unit and cause sensitive topics and children to fall lower on the priority list.

Pausing to consider the experiences of military children is a great first step toward building the empathy that's needed when guidance is given and difficult conversations begin. Recognize and let youth know that **the family is first to the mission**.

“Safe” adults and creating safe spaces

For education and meaningful discussions on sexual health and mental health to be effective for a young person, they need to feel safe around the adult with whom they are talking. Young people may not always know that an adult is safe to approach or ask questions about concerns, but they know who is unsafe. Look for small ways in everyday interactions to indicate you're safe and approachable.

Pressure to be a perfect family

Whether from internal or external factors, many young people feel the pressure to maintain a good appearance to represent their families in the community. Youth feel their behavior, success, failures and challenges will impact the professional life of their family's enlisted member.

This can create perceived feelings of shame within the youth and avoidance to talk about challenges they believe impacts their family. Create a culture of understanding in the home, let young people know that everyone has challenges and struggles, and that it's important to not judge other families or ourselves. And we should always provide support and understanding when we can.

Remember

You are not alone — Military families often have similar questions and concerns, and even often the same challenges when related to their children’s mental health or questions about sexual health. Despite experiencing the same things, many feel they are the only ones in the world experiencing this. This is simply not true, you’re not alone, just as you’re part of a community — you have a whole community of support and resources to rely on.

*“Growing up I really thought my family was the only one that dealt with this. Not true!
Everyone has these questions! Everyone!” — Anonymous*

Never pass up a learning opportunity — The military community is a learning and adaptable one. In a tight knit community, it’s likely there will be similar and even shared experiences, sometimes relating to mental health or sexual health. Regardless of its impact, big or small, never pass up an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with your young person about thoughts, feelings, decision making and safety.

Creating spaces to have open conversations about needed topics can feel daunting, but it’s not impossible to do. It may be awkward or feel uncomfortable, but a young person will always appreciate the effort the adults around them put in to show they truly care about them.