



TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT TBI

A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence



HOW CAN MY FAMILY MEMBER'S TBI AFFECT MY CHILD?

The effect a family member's TBI can have on a child varies. The child's age, relationship to the injured service member, and severity of injury can all play a role. It can be particularly frightening for a child to witness the person who previously provided them with strength and safety acting angry or withdrawn, forgetting old routines and being unable to engage in cherished physical activities. As a result, they may be confused and upset about what is occurring, and worry about the family member's condition, new financial strains, or simply adjusting to the "new normal."

HOW CAN I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT TBI?

You may naturally want to protect your child from the truth, believing they are too young to understand. However, since children have active imaginations, they may actually create a scenario worse than reality. Children of almost any age are aware that something is wrong and want to know what is happening. Although it can be difficult, it is important to communicate the truth in an age-appropriate manner that satisfies their curiosity. Try using the following analogy, and the age-specific tips on the following page, to get started:



A brain injury is different than a cut or broken bone. While a cut or broken bone will typically heal in a few days or weeks to be "all better", a hurt brain may take months or years to get better. Or, it may never completely heal. The person with TBI may look the same as they always did even though their brain is still hurt.



WHAT ARE SOME CHANGES MY CHILD MAY SEE IN MY FAMILY MEMBER WITH TBI?

Your family member's injured brain may cause them to have a hard time paying attention to, or remembering what you told them. It may also cause them to get tired easily, need frequent naps, or do things that seem strange or out of character. Sometimes the part of the brain that stops angry flare-ups becomes injured, causing them to yell and be easily annoyed. They may also be upset because of their inability to do the things they were used to, or because they don't like people treating them differently. Remind your child that your family member loves them and that these behaviors are not directed at them, but are a result of their brain injury.

PRODUCED BY THE DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY

Released June 2012 | Revised May 2022 by the Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

This product is reviewed annually and is current until superseded. 800-870-9244 • Health.mil/TBICoE

Do you have questions about this fact sheet? Feedback? Email dha.TBICoEinfo@mail.mil

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD ADJUST TO CHANGES CAUSED BY A TBI IN MY FAMILY?

It is important to recognize that a child may be grieving, just as you might be, and that a certain amount of stress is normal. This stress may cause them to say upsetting things to you. However, simply listening can be the best support for them. Explain to your child that they are not to blame for the TBI and that they are not responsible for the healing process of your family member.

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS I CAN USE TO HELP MY CHILD COPE?

Discuss expectations. Talk about what they may experience when they reunite with their injured family member. For example, describe how your family member may look, behave, and react when they come home. Be careful not to set a timeframe for when recovery will occur. Children want it all to happen quickly, but, it can be difficult to predict the length of recovery after TBI.

Encourage socialization. Help your child stay involved with friends, school, and extracurricular activities, but be flexible if they resist. Encourage family members, friends, or other important adults in your child's life to spend quality time with them, and listen to their concerns. Take cues from them about when they wish to resume their normal routine.

Communicate with your child's school. Meet with your child's teachers to explain what happened and the effects it has had on the family. The more the teachers are informed, the better they can support your child.

Reestablish routine. Consistent dinner and bed times may help them adjust to the changes that follow a family member's TBI.

Prepare your child for tough situations. Realize that teenagers may be uncomfortable when asked questions about their family member with TBI. Rehearse with them how to respond to comments or questions about how their loved one looks, behaves, or speaks.

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY CHILD IS HAVING DIFFICULTY ADJUSTING?

It can be normal for a child to pull away for a while, regress to younger behaviors, become very dependent, demand constant attention or explode in temper tantrums. Know that this is a normal reaction to a distressing situation and that these behaviors could lessen over time. Speak to your child's pediatrician if they display more concerning behaviors, such as withdrawing from peers and social activities, frequent mood swings, new sleep problems, poor school performance, or adopting risky behaviors, as these may be signs that they are not coping well. They may suggest a behavioral health consultation to best support your child.

Tips for Talking to Your Child about TBI

Ages 2–3

Use simple words, dolls and picture books to describe what is happening.



Ages 4–5



Use play time and toys, like a doctor's kit, to help you "show and tell" what is occurring to your family member.

Encourage your child to take and collect pictures of family activities. This can help them learn about and cope with the changes—not to mention make a wonderful keepsake!

Ages 6–7



Ages 8–11



Find movies with story lines similar to what your family is experiencing. Talk about their thoughts and opinions while encouraging them to ask questions. Be truthful and factual when answering.

Speak honestly and realistically about the details such as your family member's diagnosis, treatment plan, and expected outcome.

Ages 12–17

