



Navigating Family Violence and Child Trauma in Military Culture



This resource outlines practical steps to support military families in raising children with respect, empathy, and accountability.

Exploring this topic can be highly sensitive and may evoke a range of emotions in some individuals. If you find yourself needing support, assistance is available to you 24/7 through the Family Information Line (English and French, free, confidential):

North America: 1-800-866-4546 | International: 00-800-771-17722 | Email: FIL-LIF@cfmws.com

If you are in immediate danger, contact 911 in Canada or your local authorities for OUTCAN.

Preventing family violence and gender-based violence does not begin in adolescence. It begins at home in how power is modeled, how conflict is handled, and how children experience safety.

Military families have strong protective qualities including discipline, loyalty, structure, and resilience. Military life also often includes stressors such as absences, reintegration, relocations, and operational stress injuries. These pressures can influence how children understand power, gender, and safety.

IN COLLABORATION WITH:  Institute of
Child Psychology

1. Understand the Impact of Chronic Stress on Children

When exposed to yelling, intimidation, controlling behavior, or chronic tension, children's nervous systems may shift into survival mode.

Common stress responses may include:

- Hypervigilance or constant scanning for danger
- Strong startle response
- Trouble sleeping
- Headaches or stomachaches
- Difficulty calming down after conflict

Behavioral changes may include:

- Anxiety or withdrawal
- Irritability or aggression
- Perfectionism
- Emotional shutdown
- Becoming overly responsible for others

Children may also:

- Struggle with trust or feel unsafe even in calm environments
- Misinterpret neutral situations as threatening
- Have difficulty with peer relationships or conflict resolution

Supporting regulation helps shift the nervous system from survival into safety and connection. These are survival adaptations. They are not personality flaws.

2. Follow the Sequence: Regulate, Relate, Reason

Children learn best when they feel safe.

Regulate

Build predictability through routines, sleep, nutrition, physical activity, and play.

- Use sensory tools such as movement, breathing, or quiet spaces
- Reduce overstimulation when possible

Relate

Provide emotional safety, empathy and co-regulation.

- Validate feelings before correcting behavior
- Use connection phrases such as “I’m here with you”

Reason

Teach problem-solving, accountability, values, and consequences.

- Keep teaching moments brief and calm
- Revisit expectations after the child is regulated

You cannot reason with a dysregulated nervous system. Feeling safe and calm must come first.

3. Use Rhythm and Predictability

Structure lowers stress. Examples of structure include:

- Consistent bedtime routines
- Clear expectations during transitions
- Weekly family rituals
- Family meetings during reintegration

Additional supports may include:

- Visual schedules for younger children
- Preparing children ahead of transitions or changes
- Creating “anchor points” in the day that remain consistent

Reintegration after an operational absence is a critical period. Clarify roles, communicate expectations, and seek support early if tension increases.

4. Model Power Without Intimidation

Children learn about respect by observing adults and their behaviours. Within your family, you can reflect on:

- Who apologizes
- Who makes decisions
- Who interrupts
- How disagreements sound

Authority can be firm without being intimidating. Try to be aware of your tone and volume when speaking, body posture, and facial expressions.

You can also:

- Model repair after conflict by taking responsibility for your actions
- Show that disagreement can happen safely without fear
- Demonstrate calm problem-solving instead of control

5. Address Gender Messages Early

Children absorb beliefs about gender and power through modeling. Encourage emotional expression in boys, support assertiveness in girls, share responsibilities across genders, and model mutual respect in adult relationships.

Be mindful of:

- Language that reinforces stereotypes (e.g., "boys don't cry")
- Media influences that shape children's beliefs about relationships
- Encouraging respect across all identities and expressions

6. Teach Emotional Literacy

Emotional suppression increases the risk of aggression.

You can help teach skills such as:

- Naming feelings
- Expressing anger safely
- Identifying body signals
- Repairing after mistakes

You can also support this by:

- Using everyday moments to label emotions
- Teaching that all feelings are okay, but not all behaviors are
- Modeling your own emotional awareness

7. Teach Consent and Boundaries

Respect for bodily autonomy begins early. Examples of teaching this include:

- Asking for consent before any physical affection
- Teaching that stop means stop
- Allowing children to say no

Reinforce that:

- Consent can be withdrawn at any time
- Boundaries apply to both children and adults
- Respecting others' boundaries builds trust and safety

8. Reduce Parentification

Children should not be expected to manage adult problems.

Tell children clearly:

- It is not your job to fix it
- You do not have to protect me
- Adults handle adult conflict

Watch for signs such as:

- A child taking on caregiving roles for siblings or parents
- Excessive worry about adult emotions or problems
- Difficulty relaxing or engaging in age-appropriate play

9. Accountability Protects Children

If violence or intimidation has occurred:

- It must be clearly named
- Accountability is required
- Treatment must address power and control, not only anger

Accountability includes:

- Acknowledging harm without minimizing or excusing behavior
- Demonstrating repair through changed actions
- Seeking appropriate support or intervention when needed

10. Protective Factors Change Outcomes

Strong protective factors include:

- One stable, safe adult in a child's life
- Repair based on principles of attachment
- Trauma-informed support
- Community connection
- Emotional safety at home

Additional protective factors may include:

- Opportunities for play and joy
- Safe relationships outside the home (teachers, coaches, mentors)
- Access to mental health or community supports when needed

Children are adaptive. When safety stabilizes and connection repairs, development improves.

Strength and respect are not opposites.

Violence prevention starts in everyday moments, in how we speak, how we use power, and how we repair.



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