The Healing Heroes Book: 
Braving the Changes When Someone
You Love is Wounded in Service

PARENT’S GUIDE

To be used with The Healing Heroes Book from Watering Can Press. For more information or to order books, visit www.wateringcanpress.com.
Dear Friends

We all know that when men and women in uniform are called to serve, their families serve, too. Military spouses and children make many sacrifices and face challenges that are unique. And, few things affect a family’s everyday life like the return of an injured loved one. It’s a difficult time for anyone, and it can be especially confusing and overwhelming for children.

Our injured heroes’ wounds may be visible or invisible. Either way, they are complex and hard to understand, even for adults. Understandably, children can experience fear and confusion about the injury, treatment, and recovery. In some cases, the need to triage responsibilities and urgent needs for the service member means that children can get lost in the shuffle.

We hope *The Healing Heroes Book* will help children feel informed about the injury, included in the recovery process, and proud of the sacrifices their families have made. The book helps children understand their feelings, cope with changed family environments, find ways to feel better when they are down, and be hopeful about the future.

In writing *The Healing Heroes Book*, I spoke with experts on combat injuries, mental health and child development. Even more important, I spoke with the families who have lived through this transition. Through these discussions, it became clear that children impacted by a service-related injury need a few key things:

**To Feel Proud**
Everyone in a service member’s family makes sacrifices and gives so much to our country. Children are often proud of their service member, but they should also feel proud of themselves and the sacrifices made by their other family members.

**To Ask Questions and Understand**
Children need their questions answered and to understand the nature of the injury, its impact on their loved one, and how it will be treated.

**To Talk about It**
They need to know that it’s OK to express their feelings and concerns.

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To Move Forward
When one person in the family is wounded, there is change for everyone. These transitions and the unknowns can be upsetting. Children in military families are often familiar with change, but this is a new kind of challenge. During this tough transition, it helps for them to envision a positive future. They need to know there’s a plan and to feel part of a routine. And, they need to feel like they are helping and contributing to the process of moving forward.

To Be Kids
Even in the midst of this challenge, they need to be able to relax, explore and play. They need to do things to feel better and take their minds off their worries.

If you are juggling all the obligations of daily life in addition to the added challenges of treating an injury, your next question is probably….how do I do all of this? That’s why I wrote The Healing Heroes Book – to give you a structured, researched, and engaging way to help children learn, express their emotions and feel better.

This guide is designed to help parents and caregivers like you to use The Healing Heroes Book as a tool to support your child. We recognize that you have also been affected by the wound, so we’ve included tips for you in each section. Don’t forget that taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is important to supporting those around you and moving forward.

Sincerely,

Ellen Sabin
Author, The Healing Heroes Book: Braving the Changes When Someone You Love Is Wounded in Service
Getting Started

*The Healing Heroes Book* is designed for children 6 to 12 and uses an interactive/journal format that allows kids to personalize it and make it their own. So if there are multiple children in a family, we recommend providing a book for each of them. If you don’t already have a copy of *The Healing Heroes Book*, you can purchase them at [www.wateringcanpress.com](http://www.wateringcanpress.com).

The book is designed for children to use on their own, but it’s most effective if a parent or caregiver goes through the process with them. For younger children, this process will allow adults to explain and interpret concepts in age and situation-specific ways, and it opens up valuable communication for older children.

The book is not meant to be completed in one sitting. Instead, you and your child can do a section at a time, jump around, or return to sections as often as you need to. This allows time for processing the information, thinking and talking. It also helps prevent a child from getting overwhelmed.

Each of the sections in this guide addresses one of the chapters in the book. For each, we’ve provided some key questions and talking points, as well as suggestions for additional activities. We also recommend doing something fun or relaxing after these discussions so children don’t get too overwhelmed.

We’ve also included a tip in each section for you. It can be tremendously beneficial to capture your own questions, concerns, and feelings.

Please note that while we hope this book helps start conversations and promote healing, it is not intended to be a replacement for care from a professional. If you are concerned about signs of stress, anxiety, or sadness in a child, it’s smart to consult a mental health professional. It never hurts to give kids an opportunity to talk to an outside expert who can hear their concerns and offer support. Additionally, we all know that this is a family issue that impacts everyone in a family...including you. Sometimes the best thing you can do for your children is to talk to a professional yourself if you are feeling overwhelmed.
When and Where?

Homes and hospitals can become stressful places when a wounded family member is transitioning back home or recovering. If you can find a little time to step out, it might be nice to have your reading and discussion sessions somewhere peaceful like a park or at a relative or friend’s house. If you do have your “book time” at home, pick a place that feels relaxed and private—like the child’s room.

Choosing whether to have these discussions one-on-one or with the whole family is a personal decision. It may make sense to have the injured family member involved in all the discussions or just some of them. The important thing is that kids feel like they can speak openly.

Every injury and every family is different. Some families have a service member in the hospital with visible physical wounds, while some families are taking care of a loved one at home who is dealing with injuries of the mind like PTS. The book and the guide were designed so that you can adapt them to your specific situation and meet the unique needs of the children in your life.

The following pages outline activities and exercises that help children explore five key themes of The Healing Heroes Book. The book also serves as a journal of their questions, feelings, and hopes for the future. You can order copies of the book at www.wateringcanpress.com.
Pages 10 – 17 of the book help children honor and appreciate their service member and be proud of their family’s contributions to our country. This chapter of The Healing Heroes Book gives children some activities to help them appreciate and be proud of their family. You may want to give your child time to complete this section before you discuss it together.

Added Discussion Questions:

• How is your service member a hero?
• What are positive memories you have together? Page 14 lets children capture different types of memories.
• How is your family special?
• How are you a hero? This can be a hard question for kids to answer, so Page 16 gives them some ideas and guidance.

Suggestions for Additional Activities:

• **Make a Hero Collage:** Using pictures of people you know or images you clip out or get online, create a collage of people you look up to and put your service member in the center.
• **Make a T-Shirt or Sign:** Expressing pride is important. Make a t-shirt or sign that says you are proud of your military family. You can use markers or paint pens to highlight a phrase like “Proud to be a Military Family.”

For You:

Supporting your injured service member can sometimes make you feel overwhelmed and unprepared. You may feel guilty that you don’t know all the answers or the right things to do. Take a few minutes to answer the questions on Pages 10 to 14 for yourself. There are so many reasons to feel proud of your family…and yourself.
Ask Questions and Understand:

Pages 18 – 29 of the book are designed to help kids better understand the injury and how it will impact their family member. It can be a natural instinct to want to protect children and sometimes we do that by shielding them from certain information or realities. However, without information, children often make assumptions that can be scarier than the truth. This chapter includes sensitive, age-appropriate information about wounds from service (including PTS, brain injuries, burns, amputations and others.)

Added Discussion Topics and Things to Remember:

• What is the injury and what does it mean?
• How will the wound impact our lives? (The book gives examples of these points for each injury it covers.)
• It’s important to remember that children are never too young to understand some sort of explanation. It will help them cope and feel safe.
• While the information in the book is broadly geared for 6 to 12 year olds, you should be mindful of your child’s development and adjust the words, descriptions and answers to match your child’s level of understanding.
• If your wounded warrior is in the hospital, it can help to talk about what visits to the hospital will be like and what will happen when you are there. Prepare your child by telling them what they can expect to see in the hospital, in the room, and from their wounded loved one.
• You may not have all the answers to a child’s questions…and that’s OK. If things come up you don’t know, make a list together so you can ask those questions the next time you see the doctor.

Suggestions for Additional Activities:

• Make a Question List: Children will have lots of things to think about after this discussion. Give them a small notebook and encourage them to make a list of any additional questions as they come up. You can even set a date for your follow-up discussion – maybe grabbing pizza together a few days later or setting aside a few minutes before bedtime.
• Do Something Fun: A fun activity after this discussion could be letting them decorate and personalize their question notebook. You can even join in by creating and decorating your own. (See ‘For You’ tip below).
For You:

One of the hardest parts of being a parent or caregiver in the family of a wounded service member is that you are generally unprepared to take on your new role. It’s usually new territory for everyone involved. You also need the opportunity to ask questions and understand. Making a list of your questions can make things easier when you do have time with your doctor or get to talk with families who have dealt with a similar injury.
To Talk About It:

Pages 30 – 39 of the book walk children through a critical part of the coping process – expressing how they feel. Repressing fear, anger, or sadness can have negative effects on children’s physical and emotional health. They need healthy ways to express what they are feeling…and so do you.

Things to Remember:

- Walk through pages 30 to 35 together and then let a child complete the rest of the section on their own. Next, you can discuss it together.
- Kids need to be assured that expressing how they feel is different than complaining. They need to be reminded that those feelings are normal and to be expected during a difficult time.
- Some children may be able to easily identify and name their feelings. Others may need help and you can prompt them by saying things like “I bet you feel….” or “Are you feeling…?”.
- Children get permission to express their feelings from the adults in their lives. Sharing your own feelings is a good way to start the conversation and show them that it’s OK to discuss emotions.

Suggestions for Additional Activities:

- **Gratitude List:** In times of crisis or transition, negative feelings can take center stage. Even as your family deals with a tough time, there are things to be grateful for. Sit down and make a list together of the positive things in your life.
- **Call List:** Sometimes children may be reluctant to express their feelings to you on a day-to-day basis because you’re already dealing with so much or there just isn’t time. Outside perspective can be helpful. If there are family friends or trusted adults with whom a child can talk about their feelings or ask questions, reach out to those adults and explain the situation. Create a list of these people with phone numbers that your child can keep. Knowing they have someone they can call if they are feeling overwhelmed can be a powerful safety net.
- **Do Something Fun:** Many times kids have talents or hobbies that help them express how they are feeling like drawing, painting, writing, music or exercise. If there are positive ways a child works through hard feelings, encourage and make time for those activities.
**To Talk About It Cont’d:**

**For You:**

It’s important that you express your feelings too and it can be hard to find the right time and right place to do so. Talking to a counselor or other professional is never a sign of weakness -- it meets a very normal need to express concerns and vent. Talking to members of other families who have faced similar situations can also help you feel less alone and more connected.

The Healing Heroes Book has special pages where a child can spend time writing down their thoughts and expressing their feelings. If a child is having trouble opening up during your discussions, let them complete these pages on their own and then talk about them together.
Pages 40 – 51 deal with moving forward and painting a picture of your family’s future. Routine and expectations are an important part of feeling safe for children. Even at a young age, kids are creating an image in their minds of their family’s future. An injury can make that future seem uncertain.

**Added Discussion Questions and Things to Remember:**

- How will things change?
- Encourage children to think about a time their life changed before and how that turned out OK. Page 47 has an activity that you can do together.
- We don’t want children to feel like they are responsible for making things better or holding the household together, but it is important they feel like they are part of the solution. Talk about the ways a child can help out and contribute.
- Part of ‘moving forward’ is looking to the future. It is helpful to explain to children that they are in a ‘short term’ transition, that some wounds will heal, and that the future will be fine.

**Suggestions for Additional Activities:**

- **Schedule:** Whether your wounded warrior is in the hospital or at home, your schedule and routine have most likely changed. Even if it’s difficult to maintain a routine, it’s important that kids have a sense of what each day will be like so their lives can feel structured and safe. Create a weekly or monthly calendar and sit down to talk about how your schedules are changing. Working together to create a new schedule or routine can be a valuable activity for everyone involved.
- **Task List:** Create a chart that includes tasks each member of the family will do to help with daily life and moving forward. This will be a visual reminder to children that they are part of that process and contributing to your family’s future.

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Suggestions for Additional Activities Cont’d:

- **Do Something Fun:** Some of the things a child enjoyed doing with their injured service member may no longer be possible. Burn victims may not be able to go out into the sun. Those struggling with PTS or TBI may not be able to play the same games or do the same activities. Brainstorm with your child on new things they can do with their wounded warrior and arrange time to make those happen if possible. It might be playing a board game in the hospital or going to a funny movie. Every situation is different, but encouraging new activities is an important part of moving forward.

**For You:**

You may find yourself grieving the future you had planned for your family or feeling uncertain about what tomorrow holds. This is where support groups and community can be really important. Spending time with families who have been through a similar transition can help you move forward and understand options for the future.
Pages 51 - 59 are designed to help kids feel better. Children with an injured family member have to deal with certain issues and challenges that they aren’t experiencing. But they still need to be kids. They need to interact with their friends, play and take their minds off the tough stuff.

Important Discussion Questions and Things To Remember:

• What activities make you feel better or take your mind off things?
• It’s very healthy to maintain schedules for kids to play with friends, participate in sports or other extra-curricular activities, and get out and have fun. Not only will this reduce stress, it also shows them that their lives can be simultaneously challenging and joyful.

Suggestions for Additional Activities:

• **Peaceful Place:** Page 55 encourages kids to think about their “peaceful place.” Sometimes kids need some place relaxing to go to be alone, read, play with a puzzle or just get a break. You can help your child identify their peaceful place and make it a cozy, fun haven. Maybe it’s a corner in their bedroom, a playhouse or a spot in the backyard. Respect the boundaries of their special place whenever you can.
• **Helping Others:** For kids, doing nice things for others can be fun and also create a strong sense of purpose. Page 58 in the book gives some suggestions. One idea is to hold an arts & crafts session to make cards and gifts for other wounded warriors and their families. It is a fun exercise that also makes them feel connected to the larger military community.

For You:

Relaxing and having a good time might be the last thing on your mind when you are trying to support your family and injured service member. But it is essential that you take care of yourself as well. Whether it’s stealing 30 minutes to watch an episode of your favorite sitcom, grabbing lunch with a friend or going for a run, find ways to relax and focus on you for a little while. It will make you better prepared to support your family and their needs.