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Book helps children express anxiety over parent's military service

War has many victims. But one group of people affected by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan can't fend for [read more...](#)

By: Laurie Budgar

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War has many victims. But one group of people affected by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan can't fend for themselves, and Elizabeth McCarthy is determined to do something about it.

"When a parent is deployed, children don't fully understand the concept of war and what's going on overseas, but they do pick up on the news and in their classrooms that it's a dangerous place and soldiers are being killed. One of their unspoken fears is that their parents are not coming back," says McCarthy, who graduated from DU's Graduate School of Professional Psychology in 1995.

So, she wrote a book to help kids articulate their anxieties.

Patrick's Home Run (Tate Publishing, 2010) tells the story of a boy whose mother is going away.

"People keep telling him she's sacrificing for the country, and [using words like] duty, commitment. He's having trouble sleeping," McCarthy says.

Insomnia is just one symptom that bubbles up when kids can't — or won't — verbalize their emotions. Sometimes, McCarthy says, they simply don't have the words. Other times, they don't want to add to the at-home parent's worries, or imply that they're not tough enough to handle the stress of wartime.

"Kids have a problem with being direct about their feelings," she says. "They want to be strong for the rest of the family. But when they keep it in, they express it other ways."

That much became clear when McCarthy was a special agent for the FBI.

"I worked with agents who were deploying, and now I work for the military as a psychologist," she says. "Soldiers will say their kids are misbehaving, letting their grades slip, not sleeping — and they don't know why."

Even researchers have begun asking why. A study of 1,500 children, published in *Pediatrics* last December, found that those from military families had more anxiety and emotional difficulties than kids in the general population.

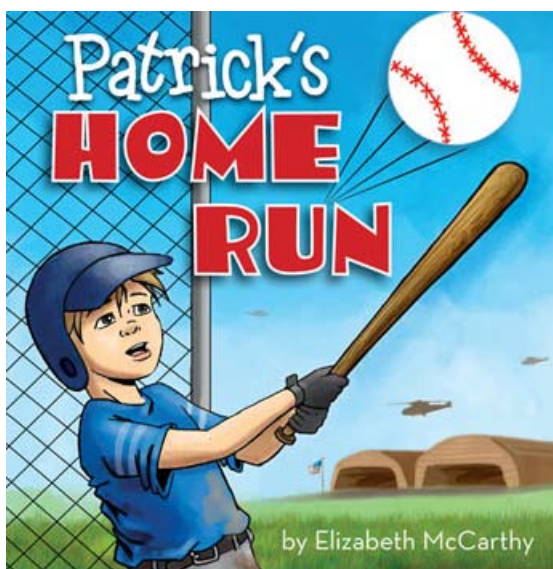
Another study, published in April in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, found repeated and extended deployments increased military kids' anxiety. And the researchers say few programs exist to help military families cope with the stress.

But McCarthy's book teaches kids a trick to help manage their emotions.

"It involves the non-deployed parent taking the child out for a special day of fun and relaxing activities, and then sharing with the child this special technique. By the end of the day, the child is primed to be open with the parent," says McCarthy, now an expert on deployment stress for the Department of Defense. "Whether it is fear, anger, worry that [a parent] will be hurt or killed, loneliness or sadness, the story lets [children] know it is OK to share their feelings with a parent."

McCarthy is donating all of her profits from *Patrick's Home Run* to the USO.

"The USO gives a lot of great support to our families, and I feel like I shouldn't benefit personally from trying to help



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these families," she says.

While McCarthy's concern for victims has been apparent throughout her career — she worked with the Denver Police Department's Victim Assistance Unit while attending DU — her focus on children is recent.

"For most of her career, she has worked with adults and military teams," says Sally Spencer-Thomas, who graduated from the DU's Graduate School of Professional Psychology with McCarthy. "I think that through that work, however, she witnessed the impact on the next generation. I cried the first time I read *Patrick's Home Run* because, as the mother of three boys, I felt for this family. I thought she did such a wonderful job weaving suggested tips for parents within a story that also helps kids understand their feelings."

McCarthy isn't stopping with *Patrick's Home Run*

"I'd like to continue a series of these children's books to address the issue of parents who come home with injuries — amputation, blindness or burns — and also parents who come home with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries. You can't see these injuries but you can see the behavior. It's very hard on the families."

She says she's been asked to also write a book on how to handle a parent's death.

"It's very difficult to write because there's no happy ending," she says.



McCarthy

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