

Talking with Children about Acts of War: Tips for Parents

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 Monday, 14 February 2005
 Last Updated Saturday, 08 March 2008

You may be concerned about the exposure your child is getting through school, media, or other adults and children. It is almost impossible to protect them from these world events. As a parent, you are the best resource of information as you are able to clarify misconceptions and/or rumors your child has heard.

While there are no "right" or "wrong" ways to discuss the topic of war, there are some general suggestions that may be helpful to you when approaching your child about this topic.

General Guidelines:

Pick a time for your discussion. It is best not to force children to talk about things until they are ready. Create an open and supportive environment where they are comfortable sharing their feelings and asking questions.

Listen to your children. Try to find out what your child already knows about the situation in Iraq (i.e. what have you seen or heard about the attacks?). Their knowledge will be determined by their age and their experiences. Your child's feelings are real and need to be acknowledged and validated. In the United States, we can reassure our children that they are safe.

Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children will be able to talk about their feelings or thoughts, while others will be more comfortable drawing pictures, writing stories, or playing with toys.

Use words and concepts that children will understand. Ask your child questions (i.e. "What are you scared of?" "Do you feel angry?"). Adjust what you ask or say to a level that your child can understand. Cater your explanations to the child's age, maturity, personality style, developmental level, and language skill. Avoid talking about enemies. It is helpful to talk about "bad or harmful actions" instead of "bad or evil people." This helps children avoid stereotypes. Use the opportunity to explain prejudice and discrimination.

Let your child know how upsetting and difficult this is for you as an adult. It is appropriate for children to know that their parents are distressed. Children may think it's their fault or worry that they have done something wrong if they are not aware of how you are feeling about the war. It is important for them to know and understand how you are taking care of your anxious feelings.

Children tend to personalize situations. Be reassuring but do not make unrealistic promises. They may worry about friends or relatives that live in areas that are associated with past and/or present terrorist incidents.

Monitor the amount of television news you watch or let your child watch. Watching and reading about the news together is the best way to gauge a child's reaction and to help them deal with the information. However, the repetition of disturbing events and scenes can be very upsetting and frightening to young children.

Give your child extra time and attention. Try to maintain family routines. Children are reassured by familiarity and structure.

Children who have experienced trauma or loss in the past are more vulnerable to the present circumstances.

Watch for changes in your child's behavior and physical symptoms. Your child may be more aggressive in school or towards family members. Your child may be clingier at home or cry more often. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical

symptoms. If your child is having trouble coping, please seek professional help.

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Encourage your child to reach out to others. Helping others can give your child a sense of control and security. Encourage your child to write letters to the president, senator, or other U.S. representatives. Find out from your child's teacher how the school or classroom is dealing with the war.