

Talking to Children about War

Families are waking up today to headlines of war. Television and radio news programs will broadcast almost nonstop coverage of the military actions in Iraq. School-age children may discuss these current events in their classrooms. Even very young children will know something important has occurred because regular television programming has been pre-empted or because their parents seem more preoccupied. Many children may begin to ask questions or express concerns that adults find difficult. How should parents and other caregivers respond to children at this time?

Begin by assessing your own beliefs, feelings and fears. You may be afraid of future terrorism or angry that diplomacy failed. It's important for adults to discuss their emotions and thoughts ideas with other adults, not children. Even teenagers will be alarmed if they hear that their parents think war will lead to more attacks like September 11 or that they will lose their jobs because of war.

Be available for your children. In times of crisis, many adults spend long hours watching television news or talking with other adults on the phone. Some want to be alone with their feelings of sadness or helplessness, and may cope by sleeping too much or going shopping. Children need the security of adults who remain calm, appear in control and maintain normal routines.

Limit children's exposure to media images of war and violence. Armed conflict is the concern of adults and governments, not children. Children worry about their safety and

the safety of the adults they love. When they witness violence, they feel less safe. If your child sees or hears about the war, and many children will, reassure her that adults are doing everything they can to keep them safe.

When children ask questions, give simple answers that they can understand.

Sometimes the best response is a question to clarify what the child really wants to know. For example, when children ask, “Why are we bombing that country?” you may ask, “How do you feel about that?” Some children may be concerned that Iraq will bomb the U.S., while other children may worry that Iraqi children will be hurt. In each case, you can frame your response to reassure them: “Iraq’s missiles can’t reach the United States,” or “Our soldiers do not want to hurt any children.”

Finally, it’s important to model non-violence at home, even when nations sometimes resort to armed conflict to solve problems. Let children know that you expect them to solve their problems through communication and cooperation rather than force.

Express your hope for a quick end to combat so there are few casualties and our troops can return to their families.

Source: Tim Jahn, human development specialist at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

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