

Talking to Children about War and Terrorism

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, our country has moved into a new, more uncertain, period in its history. With the ongoing War on Terrorism and talk of war with Iraq, children across the United States may have concerns and questions about what is happening.

Before Talking to Children

- Before talking to children about war, parents need to take time to reflect on their personal and family backgrounds and the experiences of their neighbors, school, and community in terms of war, trauma, and loss. Each family is unique. Many families and communities are affected directly by war and the threat of terrorism and many children may have immediate concerns regarding the safety of family members. Children and families directly affected by mobilization for war deserve special attention and support at this time, as well as a strong sense of respect from their peers, schools, and communities.
- If at all possible, it is important for parents to be calm in their communications with their children and, in times of distress, model constructive ways to cope together as a family. If because of the direct effect on a family, parents express understandable distress, they should take time in a calmer moment to reassure their children that the parent is there to help the child with any of their difficult emotions.
- It is important to communicate to all children, in appropriate language, that war is serious. It is also important to explain that war is intended to be protective, to prevent bad things from happening in the future.
- How parents talk to children about war varies according to the age and circumstances of the child, family, and community.

Who Should Initiate the Discussion?

- Parents should establish an atmosphere of closeness and support that will set the stage for children to come to them with worries or concerns. Most school-aged children and adolescents are likely to be aware of public discussions of war. Parents can acknowledge this reality without forcing a discussion. By being open to listening to their children, parents can help correct needless worries and concerns. Adults who work with children in schools and after-school programs can also help monitor rumors and correct misconceptions.

Talking to Children of All Ages

- For younger children, parents should serve as a buffer or “protective shield” against unnecessary information, including conversations or disagreements between adults, as well as media coverage and images related to war. Young children tend to bring the perceived danger closer to home. Parents can help young children understand that war is very serious, but they do not need to worry about something happening in their own neighborhood. Ideas of safety and security need to be strongly reinforced. Parents should also help younger children make sense of what they hear from older children and siblings.
- School-aged children, especially boys, can be fascinated and preoccupied by war, weapons, and strategy. Parents can help school-aged children understand the seriousness of war and reinforce the importance of respecting rules regarding safety and interpersonal behavior. Children may have many questions. These should be addressed directly and simply at a level they can understand. Children may be worried about personal safety as well as the well-being of family, peers, and other adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, instructors). Helping them understand that our nation’s leaders are working hard to assure the safety of our country and of our military is important. Consider activities that support military families and their communities, like sending letters of support to Department of Defense schools where many children of military families attend and schools and communities where National Guard and reserves have been mobilized. Studies have shown that when we feel we are helping, we improve our coping and reduce our distress.
- Adolescence is a time of increased independence from parents and more reliance on peers. In terms of war, more complex, motivational issues may come into play. Adolescents may be thinking about the war in the context of their own futures, and they can express a variety of thoughts, opinions, and feelings of vulnerability related to the threat of war. Parents should also be aware of viewpoints expressed by adolescents’ role models. Adolescents may be spending more time talking with their peers than with their parents. Therefore, use opportunities to acknowledge world events in the course of watching news, over dinner, or other appropriate times the parent and adolescent are together. Help adolescents to understand that these are

serious times; parents should be open to listening in a respectful manner to what their adolescents would like to say and what they are hearing from their friends. It is very important for parents to caution their adolescents about reckless or risk taking behaviors and to reinforce the important contribution of constructive community service activities.

- It is important to reconfirm that this is a war against the current Iraqi government and the dangers it represents. Parents need to sensitively acknowledge and validate children's compassion for the impact on Iraqi civilians. Parents may need to take time to discuss that people with similar characteristics (e.g., religion, culture, ethnic background) are NOT the enemy and should continue to be treated with respect. Parents and school personnel of school-age children and adolescents may need to monitor hateful talk and actions. Remember, parents and teachers are role models at all times for children, and children will mirror their actions and comments.

Children Who Might Need Special Attention

- Some children might be particularly vulnerable to anxiety and distress during a time of war. This includes children of refugee or immigrant families; children with depression, anxiety, or other mental health needs; and children who have experienced prior trauma or loss. For children who have experienced prior losses, anxiety about war could result in increased worries about separation. Children with histories of trauma could experience a resurgence of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Therefore, it is important for parents and school personnel to keep in mind children's vulnerabilities in understanding their response to concern about war and to consider any extra needs they may have.
- Military families will be taking extra time to support children and address their concerns about family members at risk. Parents should acknowledge the child's feelings of vulnerability, worries, and fears, but also give them "permission" to enjoy themselves in their normal activities. Older children may have peers with whom they can discuss events and feelings. This can be encouraged; however, it does not replace discussions with parents. Different family members maybe reminded in different situations about the absence of and dangers faced by their family members. Families should create a way in which any child knows how to get extra support at any time. There are special times when children are more vulnerable, like bedtime or during activities when they would miss their family member when extra support is important.
- Parents of children of Middle Eastern descent may need to take extra time to discuss how world events and war may impact their relations with peers. Keeping open communication is important to address any potential bullying or other negative actions directed toward the children. Parents also should maintain good communications with their children's schools. If families

continue to have relatives in the regions likely to be involved in the fighting, parents should be open to discussing their children's concerns related to the safety of their relatives and friends, and to acknowledge how difficult it is to worry.

Monitoring Children's Exposure to the Media

- Television news coverage of preparations for war and combat and its aftermath may be disturbing to children. Much TV news footage is composed of brief and vivid exposures—a flash of a building burning, the sound of gunfire and of injured people screaming for aid. This kind of material can elicit fear and arouse anxiety in children.
- If parents allow young children to watch news coverage of war events, they should watch it with them in order to answer questions, explain, and discuss. Even news commentary can include wording or images that can be distressing for children.

Sharing Your Own Opinions and Beliefs

- Parents can reveal their own beliefs about the war to their children. Parents of adolescents in particular should try to understand and respect their children's views about war, even if those views differ from their own. People can have strong and differing opinions about momentous events such as war, especially in a democracy.
- Parents should use caution, however, in engaging in intense disagreements between themselves in front of their children. The tone of parental discussions can sometimes frighten young children, if parents express their views in an angry or aggressive manner. When discussing beliefs and opinions with children, do so in a calm, direct way.
- Parents of older children may acknowledge their own preoccupations with war and world events that may result in lapses of attention. At the same time, they can provide reassurance to children who might be able to sense their parents' worries and withdrawal. Parents of younger children need to carefully monitor reactions, as young children sensing this withdrawal may be increasingly and unnecessarily worried and afraid.

How to Foster Resilience in the Face of War

- During war, it is important for all families to spend extra time together and “stay connected.” Parents should talk with and hug their children. It is not “life as usual,” even if daily routines are not visibly interrupted. In addition,

parents and other caregivers should provide support for each other. It is also important for children and families to take constructive steps to reach out or strengthen existing connections to their community. Many families will want to reinforce their religious supports and values. This kind of “social glue” can be even more important during time of war.

- In this time of concern over terrorism, it is important for parents and children to calmly revisit family emergency plans and preparation. Parents should also refamiliarize themselves with their children’s school’s plans as well.
- It is helpful to remind an anxious child of the many ways in which people came together after September 11 and our nation’s continued efforts to protect and provide safety.

Through funding from the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network has established a Terrorism and Disaster Branch. Among the leaders of the Terrorism and Disaster Branch are nationally recognized experts in working with children and families under many different war circumstances. Our national Network of 37 sites nationwide stands ready to provide information and support to local communities and to assist military families.

For more information about the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and its Terrorism and Disaster Branch, visit our web site at www.NCTSN.org.