

News Release

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Talking to Children about War and Terrorism Tips for Parents and Teachers

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Once again, parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of discussing the threat of terrorism and the prospect of war with their children. Although these are understandably difficult conversations, they are also extremely important. Keep in mind, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to have these discussions. However, here are some suggestions that you may find helpful.

1. Create an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions. At the same time, it's best not to force children to talk about things until they're ready.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you're “making things up”. It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future.
3. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
4. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
5. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
6. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. It's fine to let children know that they are safe in their house or in their school. But you can't promise children that there won't be a war or that no one will get hurt.
7. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in a city or state directly or indirectly associated with terrorist incidents.
8. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems.
9. Avoid stereotyping groups of people by country or religion. Use the opportunity to explain prejudice and discrimination and to teach tolerance.
10. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. Children will be very interested in how you respond to world events. They will also notice changes in your routines such as reducing business travel or modifying vacation plans, and they will learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.

11. Let children know how you're feeling. It's OK for children to know if you are anxious, confused, upset or preoccupied by local or international events. Children will usually pick it up anyway, and if they don't know the cause, they may think it's their fault. They may worry that they've done something wrong.
12. Don't let children watch too much television with violent or upsetting images. Ask local TV stations and newspapers to limit the repetition of particularly disturbing or traumatic scenes. Many media outlets have been receptive to such overtures.
13. Help children establish a predictable routine and schedule. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays and group activities all take on added importance.
14. Don't confront your child's defenses. If a child is reassured that things are happening "very far away" it's probably best not to argue or disagree. The child may be telling you that this is how they need to think about things right now in order to feel safe.
15. Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about activities their child's school has planned. Teachers should know about discussions which take place at home, and about any particular fears, concerns or questions a child may have mentioned.
16. Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news of war or heightened fears of possible terrorist attacks. These children may need extra support and attention.
17. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
18. Children who are preoccupied with questions about war, fighting, or terrorism should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional help include: ongoing sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts, worries, recurring fears about death, leaving parents or going to school. If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family practitioner or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.
19. Although many parents and teachers follow the news and the daily events with close scrutiny, many children just want to be children. They may not want to think about what's happening half way around the world. They'd rather play ball, climb trees or go sledding.

War and terrorism are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel confused, upset and anxious. As parents, teachers and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner.

Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they will get through these challenging times and go on with their lives. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.

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