



Furthering Families

Supporting Children During Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath

In recent weeks, the United States was at war with Iraq. In the last two years, there has been a war in Afghanistan, and terrorist attacks on American soil. As adults, we often hope to protect children from news like this. Yet, when things like this happen, extensive and graphic media coverage is the norm. Even if children don't know anyone who is personally affected, they have probably seen or heard about what happened in their neighborhood, school, or living room. While all children are different, thoughts and images about violence, war and destruction often foster feelings of anxiety, confusion, uncertainty and fear. How should we as the adults who care for and about children, help them understand and cope with armed conflict and its aftermath?

Monitor what your child is seeing on television and hearing on the radio.

Limit the media coverage in your home, including newspapers, radio and television. Seeing intense, graphic images or hearing horrific, violent stories may create stress and anxiety in children. If at all possible, younger children (under 7) should be protected from any media coverage of the war and violence. If older children want to watch television reports, or you would like them to, watch as a family and discuss what you see and hear.

Talk about it.

Children need to learn that it is okay to talk about bad things or unpleasant events. Before you speak, find out what your child knows about the war, and how he understands it. Begin your conversation by asking a question that needs more than a yes or no response. Try something like, "I wonder what you have heard about the war in Iraq?". His answer will help you decide what and how much you need to say. Even if he is uninterested or unaffected right now, your asking just gave him permission to have future conversations about the war or other difficult situations.

Be a careful listener.

Listen with your eyes, your ears, your head, and your heart. If your child is unable to share her thoughts and feelings, kindly ask open-ended questions that might offer insight. Children are often reassured knowing that you care about how they feel, and that they can share their inner most thoughts with you.

Notice her non-verbal communication cues like body language, tone of voice, gestures, and eye contact. All of these, along with her behaviors, provide important clues to your child's thoughts and feelings.

Allow children to ask questions, and answer them sensitively, directly, and honestly.

Children learn by asking questions. It is their way of gathering and sorting through information about things that they do not understand, and offers an opportunity for a “teachable moment”. When answering, keep your child’s age and personality in mind, as you decide what to share and the language to use. Tell the truth, and only give enough information to answer the question the child is asking. If you don’t know what to say, it’s okay to admit that you don’t have all the answers.

Allow them to express their feelings and fears without evaluating or judging them—especially if they are different than yours.

Keep in mind that children might experience a range of feelings, and that all of these feelings are acceptable. There are no right or wrong ways to feel, but there are helpful and unhelpful ways to cope with these feelings. Acknowledge his feelings, so he understands his response is common. Tell him that lots of other people, including adults, feel this way at times like this.

Encourage activities that allow your child to express feelings in non-threatening ways.

Let them draw, write, role-play, and other playful activities that allow children the opportunity to work through, not talk out, their thoughts and feelings. Play helps children feel in control, problem solve and experiment with different ideas in a safe and secure environment, particularly in stressful situations. Let her incorporate toy props and action figures into her play to explore some feelings regarding war and violence. As long as the play doesn’t become disruptive or violent, it can be a healthy expression for her, and a good indicator of what she is thinking and feeling.

Help children feel safe.

It is common for children to worry about how world events will affect them personally. Will fighting happen in their neighborhood, or hurt someone in their family? Never promise that nothing bad will happen to them, but utilize these opportunities when children are feeling vulnerable to reassure them that you, and many other people, are doing all you can to keep them safe.

Maintain a regular routine as much as possible.

Children thrive upon routines. Try to live your lives as you did prior to the beginning of the war. Plan for mealtime, clean up, and sleep schedules to be the same as they were, and continue to participate in social and recreational activities. Routines and structure will help them feel as if their world is safe and predictable.

Monitor your response to what has happened.

Children look to their parents and other caring adults to determine how they should respond in a variety of situations. They are also very sensitive to your mood and feelings. Share your feelings honestly, and model appropriate expressions of emotions so he sees ways to cope with these kinds of feelings. Also, try not to let your personal interest in the war consume your lives. We live in an era of 24-hour media coverage that can be overwhelming for children. Find ways to stay abreast of current events without flooding your children with too much information or conversation.

Do something.

When difficult things happen, many people feel better if they get busy doing something. During war times, some families write a soldier, visit veteran’s hospitals, collect money for the Red Cross, send care packages to the troops, or write an article for a paper. Involvement doesn’t have to be limited to the war, either. Just being involved with a community or charitable organization that means something to your child or family is often enough to restore feelings of hopefulness, control, and usefulness.

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