

Talking with Children about War

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Background

War and threats of terrorist attacks arouse strong emotions in all of us, especially children who may not understand what is happening and who are powerless to influence events. Media coverage brings images of conflict, tragedy and suffering right into our living rooms. All of us, including our children, will be dealing with fear, anxiety, grief, sadness, anger and other strong emotions. Economic uncertainty, fear of the unpredictable and honest disagreements among fellow citizens compound the emotional stress. Therefore, it is important to develop long-term strategies to help ourselves and our children cope.

Things to Expect

"Maintaining Normal"

- The advice to "maintain normal" is sound. However, we need to realize that our "normal" during these perilous times has been redefined. We should expect an undercurrent of anxiety, which will ebb and flow as events unfold.
- Everyone processes strong emotions differently depending on temperament and individual circumstances.

Intense Emotions

- Expect intense emotional reactions ranging from sadness to fear to anger. These reactions may be unpredictable, coming and going without warning.
- There will be a greater risk for depression. Warning signs include ongoing sleep problems, feelings of hopelessness and guilt, and extreme sadness.
- Intense anger may make us want to strike out and look for someone or some group to blame.
- The ongoing tension can make us grumpy or edgy with others, leading us to "take things out" on the people closest to us.
- Feelings of sadness and fear may inhibit people from finding enjoyment.

Stress and Anxiety

- People feel more anxious when it seems like things are out of control. This is particularly true for children.
- Uncertainty accentuates anxiety.
- Heightened anxiety can lead to difficulty sleeping, paying attention, and remembering.

- Prolonged stress suppresses the immune system, leading to greater susceptibility to illness.
- Many people eat more when under stress.

Coping Strategies for All Ages, Children through Adult Relationships

- Talk to people about what you are feeling.
- Stay connected with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc., to avoid feeling isolated.
- There are many honest disagreements about policies and strategies. Deal with disagreements without being disagreeable. Avoid personal attacks against people with a different point of view.
- Reflect according to your religious or spiritual beliefs. Spiritual rituals and discussions can be very important activities to do as a family and as a community.

Education

- Learn about the issues involved in the war. Don't rely on electronic media for all your information. Print media provide more in-depth coverage. Seek out information from different points of view.
- Monitor your sources of information. For example, pay attention to media that help you understand what is happening and avoid media that simply exploit your emotions.

Health

- Watch your diet. Many people over-eat when they are under stress, which can lead to further feelings of guilt, sadness and hopelessness.
- Get regular exercise to help relieve stress and take your mind off the tragedy.

Activity

- Maintain a daily routine as much as possible.
- Find something constructive and/or fun to do.

Tips for Parents

- Take time to think about, and cope with, your own feelings.
- Help your children cope with their feelings by simultaneously acknowledging their feelings and reassuring them.
- Don't try to talk children out of what they are feeling.
- Share your feelings with your children (depending on their ages), but be careful not to look to your children for support. Avoid extreme language when sharing your feelings or reactions.
- Talk to children about constructive ways to handle their anger.
- Let children know it's okay to ask questions. Answer their questions directly, but do not give them more information than they need or more than you think they can handle.

- Try to balance the attention you give to the war and unfolding events with maintaining "normal" activities and routines at home.
- Monitor what your kids see and hear through the media to make sure you are comfortable with the messages they are receiving based on their age, temperament, maturity level, etc.
- Make sure your children eat well and get enough exercise and sleep.

Specific tips for each age group

Early Childhood

Even though very young babies and toddlers may not know what is going on, they may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense."

- Try to stay calm around babies and toddlers.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Routines are reassuring for babies.
- Shield babies and toddlers from media coverage as much as possible.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers will be more tuned in to what is happening. They may have questions about war, terrorism, death and other topics.

- Safety is a primary concern for this age group. Reassure them that adults are in charge and will keep them safe.
- Preschoolers are also concerned about the safety of parents, relatives, and friends. Reassure them. Let them know your whereabouts and keep your commitments to them.
- Preschoolers are not always able to distinguish fantasy and reality. Limit media exposure.
- Bedtimes are very important. Stories, books and tuck-ins are crucial.
- Try to maintain your children's normal routines.
- Give them lots of hugs and physical reassurance.

Elementary School

School age children will be more aware of what is going on. They have probably had discussions at school and with friends.

- Children this age are also concerned about their own safety, as well as that of family and friends. Try to spend extra time together. This will provide extra reassurance.
- Ask them if they have any questions. If they do, tell them what you know without exaggerating or overreacting.
- Don't be surprised if they are more irritable and touchy. Be extra patient.
- Limit TV coverage.
- Try to continue normal routines, especially at bedtime.
- It is especially important to make sure children this age do not generalize their feelings of fear or anger toward innocent members of ethnic or religious groups.

Middle School

Children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They will see many war images on TV and in magazines. They are probably discussing the war, terrorism, and related topics in school.

- Talk to your middle school children and answer any questions. This will help you determine how much they know and may help you correct any misinformation they might have.
- Acknowledge any feelings of fear, horror, and anger.
- Provide comfort and reassurance.
- Children this age will be more interested in what might happen in the future. Share what you know without exaggeration. Don't burden them with fears that you might have.
- Some children may act out scary feelings through misbehavior. Others may become more withdrawn. Pay attention to these cues and ask them to tell you about their feelings.
- Use historical examples (e.g. Civil War, World War II, etc.) to explain our country has been through very difficult times before to give them a sense of hope.

High School

High school students have probably had conversations with their peers and teachers. They might have very legitimate fears about what this will mean for their immediate future.

- Questions about the draft, military service, foreign policy and the economic repercussions are all legitimate issues for this age group. It is important to discuss these topics with them.
- Acknowledge any fear, sadness, and anger they have.
- Some teens may want to block out the whole thing. It may appear that they do not care. This often masks real fears and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- It is normal for teens to stay focused on the events in their own life and may resist thinking or talking about the war. Encourage conversation but don't force it.
- Some teens may make jokes. Humor can be a way to help them cope, but discourage them from humor that disregards the importance of taking the tragedy seriously.
- Some teens may be very interested in discussing the policy issues involved. Be willing to engage them in serious discussions.
- Be careful to avoid targeting particular groups, especially people of different nationalities or ethnic backgrounds.

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