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Supporting Children during War and Armed Conflict
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Family and Youth Security Series

Supporting Children during War and Armed Conflict

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Current world events include war and armed conflict across the globe, such as the war in Iraq. Media coverage brings images of war and armed conflict into the lives of nearly every family in every community across our country. Even if American children don't know anyone serving in the military or deployed to the Middle East, they have probably seen or heard about the war in their neighborhood, school or living room. Though all children are different, thoughts and images about violence, war and destruction often foster feelings of anxiety, confusion, uncertainty and fear.

How children react to war and armed conflict will vary by child. But, because children lack the skills and life experiences of adults to process world events, they often feel afraid. In addition to fear, feelings of sadness and anger are also common reactions following armed conflict and war. Because we cannot protect our children from reactions like these, how can we best help them understand and cope with war 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. If older children want to watch television reports of armed conflict 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 OK 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. Notice your child's nonverbal communication cues — body language, tone of voice, gestures and eye contact. All of these, along with her behaviors, provide important clues to a child's thoughts and

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

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 give only enough information to answer the question the child is asking. If your first response did not answer the question that was asked, your child will ask another! If you don't know what to say, it is OK to admit that you do not have all the answers.

Allow children to express their feelings and fears without evaluating or judging them, especially if they are different from 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 your child's feelings so he understands his reaction is normal. Tell him that lots of other people, including adults, feel this way at times like this.

Encourage activities that allow children to express feelings in nonthreatening ways. Let your child draw, write, role play and engage in other playful activities that allow her the opportunity to work through, not talk out, her thoughts and feelings. Play helps children feel in control, problem solve and experiment with various 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 about war and violence. As long as the play does not 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 the war will affect them personally. Will it be in their neighborhood or hurt someone in their family? Never promise that nothing bad will happen to your child, because this is a promise that you may not be able to keep. But use these times when children are feeling vulnerable as opportunities 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 before the beginning of the war. Plan for mealtime, cleanup and sleep schedules to be the same as they were, and continue to participate in social and recreational activities. Routines and structure will help your child feel as if the world is safe and predictable.

Monitor your response to the war. 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 to a soldier, visit veteran's hospitals, collect money for the Red Cross, send care packages to the troops or write articles 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.