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Talking with Children in Times of Violence

Does talking with children about the war make it worse?
How do I bring up the conversation?
Should I tell them how I feel?
How can I help a child when I am feeling helpless myself?
How much should I tell them?

Children can be overwhelmed and confused during stressful times. Having limited experiences with raising children during times of war, many adults may find it helpful to have some paths for talking with children. This workshop will explore developmentally appropriate responses. Active listening, empowering children, modeling, and emotional development will be discussed in a format that will supply adults with skills to use with children.



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Agenda

1. Introduction
2. Talking with Children
3. TV
4. Emotions
5. What To Do
6. Stress
7. Finale

1 - Introduction

In the US, this war is more real for today's child than any before it

Because many children have the 9/11 terrorist attacks permanently burned into their heads, war is no longer an abstraction. The frightened adults running from a collapsing building, planes smashing into buildings, and bleeding people breathing soot filled air while searching for safe shelter, are all video clips our children have witnessed many times in the past few years. Add to this the fact that this war is being shown in real time battle scenes. Minute by minute, the world is seeing the most brutal side of warfare. Scenes normally seen by a handful of people are being broadcast into every household. Our kids are in a headset that has never been the norm before this time.

2 - Talking with Children

- Encourage your child to talk to you.
- Listen to their concerns, then reassure them.
- Give children honest information about the events.

Let your children know adults are taking care of them. Above all, in any fearful time, children need to know that they are safe and that their parents or guardians will take care of their needs.

Talk with children about war. When a child asks, "What is a war?" respond with "What do you think a war is?" This way we can follow their lead. If the reply is, "I don't know," then follow up with age appropriate, simplified answers.

Be a good listener. More important than talking to children is listening to children. We may be surprised to find out how much they already know. School buses, playgrounds, overhearing adults, and exposure to the news are all ways and places children pick up on current events. Often this information is misunderstood. What words and events mean in the adult world are often different from what they mean to a specific child. One child misunderstood the word *hijacker*. He thought the word was *kayaker*. Such a small error to make; such a huge misunderstanding to have.



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Children need to know that you understand that what is happening is confusing and complicated. Include an appreciation for their willingness to talk with you about it.

Before answering children's questions, find out where they are coming from. Then answer their questions succinctly and specifically. Starting a civics lecture is unhelpful and unnecessary. Adults need to find other adults to discuss the war, not children.

Find out more

- *"I'm not sure. Let me find out."*
- *"Good question. I need some time to figure out how I can explain this."*
- *"What do you think about this?"*
- *"I don't know. How could we find out?"*

When Fred Rogers was a boy and would see scary things on the news, his mother would say to him,
"Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

When talking with children about war, check to see if stereotyping is an issue. Include the idea that most people in Iraq don't hurt other people and they believe in many of the things we do. Include ideas like the problem with overgeneralizing; "If one child from your neighborhood broke a window, it would be a mistake to say children in that neighborhood are window breakers."

Observe children at play. Play is the most important way a child makes sense of their world. Actively observing children working through challenges gives adults insight into what the child is trying to comprehend. Interrupting play usually is not helpful. Entering into play to support and be a part of the child's world takes skill and thought. If the play appears to need assistance, an open-ended question may be enough.

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are a way for adults to support, challenge, explore or augment a child's interest. O.E.Q.s also help the adult find out what a child is thinking about. With O.E.Q.s the child's agenda and ideas should be the focus of the questions.

1. Open-ended questions cause a child to think or ponder about the question.
2. You may know an answer for the question, but are looking to the child to think about an issue or subject.
3. The question needs to be asked genuinely.
4. There is no right or wrong answer to an open-ended question.

Open-ended questions often include: how? what? could? would?

Closed-ended questions often include: is? are? do? did?

Could you tell me about this? What's happening here? How could you figure that out?



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Talking with children about your feelings can be helpful IF,

- You are honest and concise.
- You are using descriptions like sad and worried rather than frightened and furious. Having a child see fearful adults diminishes the amount of support the adults can offer the child.
- You are not using the child for your own support.
- Children are not trying to protect you from your own feelings. Some children may worry about talking with adults because it might make them feel bad.

Even if we don't talk directly to children about war and terrorism, they are aware that it is there. Young children are able to pick up on a stressed, fearful, sad, angry adult. They know something is wrong. Older children overhear adults talking, the news, other children discussing the events. Trying to protect children from the community's heightened state of alert may give an unintended message; we don't talk about those things. This denies the child a chance to be supported in working with these situations.

If we don't talk to children about what is happening, they will still get the information, but through sources that may not demonstrate our beliefs or values. Discussing the situation honestly, simply, and at their level can mean the difference between being overwhelmed and feeling secure.

For older children, if parents don't talk about the subject, kids may be left with misinformation.

The younger the child, the more egocentric they are. My safety. My parents. My family and friends. Are they safe? Young children feel that things are very personal. These children need concrete ideas to understand. The older children include others in their concern. Children who live in Iraq. Families with soldiers in Iraq. Innocent bystanders in war. Are they safe?

Early elementary school children usually are concerned about separation and safety.
Middle school children are usually troubled by the fairness and the care of other people issues.
High school students are often involved in the ethical challenges presented.

- **Finding out what children know** is helpful in determining your response to their questions. "What is a war?" can be answered with, "Tell me what you know about it." Then the adult can decide on the best response to the question. It is much like the joke, "Where did I come from?" After the parent responds with graphic sexual information the child says, "Oh, I thought I was born in New Hampshire."
- **For a question like, "Will kids get killed?"** an answer that reassures the child is better than plain, cold facts. "People who are fighting in wars don't want to hurt children." If pushed for more information, honesty counts, "I am afraid some children may get killed. It is very sad."
- **"Will you be killed?"** "I have no reason to think that I would be killed. We live a long way away from Iraq. That is where the war is happening."
- **Talking about war requires more than one conversation.** Kids have short attention spans. Children may only want to talk briefly, but for many times.



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- We can tell children war is supposed to be productive, helping to prevent bad things from happening in the future.
- **Note: the vast majority of children think that war is bad.** They have been taught that fighting is not a good way to solve problems. Many have been disciplined for treating others aggressively. If parents disagree, finding ways to differ and be respectful are important. Talking with children today about important issues is setting them up for future discussion that you want to be a part of. Try to enter into a disagreement to understand the other side. Be careful not to give the message, “You don’t know what you are talking about.”
- **Be careful when talking about the other side.** Children can better understand “bad actions” than “bad people.”
- Some children choose not to think about war. Respect that decision.

3 - TV

Limit your children’s exposure to broadcast news media.

“Consider the news rated X for young children.”

- Dr. T. Barry Brazelton

The television industry asks that children tune in to cartoons and tune out war coverage. The best bet, **turn the TV off.** Even programs that are deemed appropriate for children may be interrupted for news updates, inappropriate commercials and the like. Studies done after 9/11 show a direct correlation between television watching and increased chances of post-traumatic stress disorder. Other studies also show that both boys and girls who watch violent TV programs run an increased risk of aggressive adult behavior, including spousal abuse and criminal offenses, no matter how they act in childhood.

Because children do not understand geography, in their head a bombed building could be down the street. The impact of television is huge on children. They can easily develop fears and concerns that are out of proportion to what is really happening.

4 - Emotions

Whether a child is scared, angry, frustrated, stressed, overwhelmed, or sad, he needs the same thing, a calm adult. Becoming alarmed or overacting does little to help a child.

Adults can safely express sadness and concern without exposing children to fear and doom. Be especially patient with your child.

With older children you may use war discussions to talk about your values. Make sure to leave most of the conversation in their hands. Typically, having time for parents and pre-teenagers to examine moral beliefs is few and far between.

Help children learn to own and work with all feelings constructively, especially anger.



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After children express fear, it is typical for them to demonstrate sadness and anger. Parents may feel they need to protect children from these feelings. This is unhelpful and impossible. Emotional development includes acceptance of all feelings and positive ways to work with all emotions. Through modeling, parents can show children ways to cope with every emotion.

Adults don't have to fix the way children feel. Accepting, respecting, and supporting all reactions helps children develop positive coping skills. Children are as different in their reactions as adults. Some children are extra sensitive to war, violence, and terrorism, and are stressed more easily. These children need thoughtful adults who understand them. Especially for these children, the TV media is harmful. Exposure can rob them of their need to feel safe.

Forcing children to "be brave" may have unintended consequences. Take their fears seriously and let them know you are there to help them.

Primary concern for children is that they are safe. Reinforce the message. You will help protect them.

5 - What To Do

Helpful Activities

Preschoolers

- Continue with daily routines.
- Comfort and reassure children through cuddling, holding, and snuggling as well as verbal support.
- Cut down on long separations when possible.
- Encourage lots of time to play with open-ended materials, rescue equipment, toy medical supplies, art materials (clay, sand, water, playdough, markers, paint, crayons, wood & nails, blocks). When talking to children about their art rather than saying, "What is it?" or "I like your picture," it may be better to start the conversation with "Can you tell me about this?"
- Write a child's story about stressful events.
- Write a story about resolving an event or feeling (an issue book).
- Shut off the news on TV and the radio.

Older Children

- Give them extra attention.
- Be gentle when correcting behaviors. Children have a greater chance at learning through guidance than through punishment.
- Allow a child to repeat their telling of the events.
- Encourage children to talk about what's important to them. If someone is not ready to open up, honor that.
- Shut off the news on TV and the radio.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Help children discover ways they can be helpful.
- Promote physical activity as a way to work with stress.



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What Else Can I Do?

- Watch the news when children are not present. Limit your own TV viewing.
- When talking with children, stress that they are safe in their homes, schools and neighborhoods.
- Like answering questions about sex, children need to hear pieces that they are capable of understanding, not the whole story in one fell swoop.
- Keep your answers brief and simple. Allow for many opportunities to talk. Make lots of chances for the child to revisit a discussion.
- Expose children to positive stories about volunteers, heroes, etc...

How do I explain it to the children when I don't understand it myself? The problem here is that if we don't talk/listen to children about terrorism and war, a dangerous cycle of silence can be the result.

Parents who promise that nothing bad will happen risk losing the children's trust when those children learn parents cannot control all situations. A better approach is reassuring children that adults will do everything they can to keep the children safe. You may want to include specific precautions being taken, i.e., the school's safety drills, mom and dad having cell phones, police being available.

An effective cure for feeling powerless is action. Adults can take action and support children to take action. Empowering ways to work with emotions,

- volunteering
- giving blood
- being helpful in your community
- raising money for victim relief
- supporting others
- keeping a journal
- writing letters (to the editor, friends, military personnel)
- donating needed supplies
- making emergency plans
- designing leaflets
- attending vigils
- sending a card to "any service member mail" or someone who is known to the child/family/friend/neighborhood.

By not talking to children about war, there may be an unintended message that it isn't okay to talk about things like this. This may reinforce the feeling of helplessness. Children need to know that it is normal to feel frightened. As strange as that may sound, it can be reassuring to hear.

6 - Stress

Not all stress is bad. It can be motivating and empowering. Stress can also be overwhelming and disempowering when,

- there is not enough support.
- there are too many stressors.
- the stress coping mechanisms are under developed.

Stressors are numerically squared. One stress may be manageable. But two starts to feel like 2x2 or 4. Two stressors can feel like four things are wrong. When we start to approach 4 or 5 actual stressors, they can feel like 16 or 25 things are going wrong. One stressful event will make another one more difficult to deal with.



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Children don't just use words to tell us they are stressed. Behaviors are often better indicators, especially for young children. Regressive behaviors like bed-wetting, thumb sucking, separation problems, or unable/unwilling to fall asleep alone, as well as other behaviors like irritability, nightmares, academic problems, and aggressive behaviors, are typical signs that a child is stressed.

Three things are against children handling stress well.

- Children do not have mature reasoning skills.
- Children have a hard time looking at the big picture and understanding cause and effect.
- Children have not had the years needed to become competent stress handlers.

Help children handle stress by,

- **Modeling.** How do you handle stress? Children look to their important adults to learn about how to handle situations.
- **Get into the child's understanding.** Remember what it was like when you were their age. Tailor your communication to reflect their development.
- **Talk with your child about their concerns and challenges.** Communication is a good source of comfort, information, and security.
- **Be truthful** without adding too many details.
- **Involve your child in doing something about the stressor.** "What can we do about this?" "What do you think would be helpful here?"
- **Make sure that physical activity is built into the day.** This helps inner tension to be released.
- **Physical closeness helps children feel secure.** Hand holding, hugs, lap sitting, and snuggles reinforce to children, "I am here for you."
- **Keep routines, routine.** Accustomed actions help alleviate the fear of the unknown. Same pre-bedtime rituals, same dinner schedules, and same day-to-day events, help build security especially during stressful times. Children take comfort in things that are predictable and familiar. It is helpful to keep things as normal as possible.
- **Release tension** - talking, playing (art activities, dramatic play), doing physical activities, writing stories and letters, making emergency plans, giving blood, making cards, watching family videos, designing leaflets, and attending vigils are ways to de-stress.

Signs of Stress

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| • sadness | • outbursts |
| • crying | • tantrums |
| • excessive clinging | • aggression |
| • fear | • stomachaches |
| • nightmares | • headaches |
| • anxiety | • regression |

Having adults ignore difficult issues can aggravate a child's coping abilities.



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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

If the signs of stress do not subside or if they get worse, it may be time to find additional support for the child, i.e., counselors, clergy, social workers. Increased anxiety, distraction, fear, or hopelessness are signs that additional help is needed. Typical signs of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) include:

- sleep problems including nightmares and waking early
- flashbacks and replays which are unable to be shut off
- intrusive, troubling images
- impaired memory
- inability to concentrate
- hypervigilance
- exaggerated startle response
- irritability, sudden intense anger and occasional violent outbursts
- panic attacks
- avoidance of things that remind of the event
- hypersensitivity - almost every remark is perceived as critical
- obsessiveness
- unexplained joint and muscle pain
- nervousness and anxiety
- depression
- excessive levels of shame, embarrassment and guilt
- undo fear
- low self esteem, low self confidence, low self worth
- physical numbness
- emotional numbness

7 - Finale

Take GREAT care of yourself. You can only take care of children as well as you take care of yourself. Do things that help you feel better. This allows you to enjoy doing the things that help make your child feel better.



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