

Helping Children Cope with War

by Letti Hardin

The media coverage of the current war actions in the Middle East is at an all time high. We are able to watch events in “real time,” get e-mail updates at the click of a mouse, and have many different war coverage options when watching the nightly news. According to the PBS website, experts say that children should not be exposed to most of the images of war. However, it is virtually impossible to shield your children from all aspects of the war. This handout will give you information and strategies to help your child or the children in your care cope with the war.

1. Limit the amount of media that your children are exposed to about the war. If your child is under the age of 6, they may not understand the TV news coverage of the war, so it is better to **not** watch these types of programs when your child is in the room. Most young children do not understand that these events are happening far away, they may think that a replay of earlier events is happening again in the present time. For older children, the safest form of media for war coverage is the newspaper. It encourages reading, it won't have as many disturbing images, and it is a form of media that you can control and discuss in a leisurely manner.

2. Ask your children what they know. If your child is worried about bombs on planes, ask them what they know about the topic first. This way, you can directly respond to their fear, help to comfort them and assure them that they are safe. Do not add to their fears by giving them information that they didn't know and didn't need to know.

3. Keep your answers direct and simple. The younger the child the more simple the answer should be. Try to keep your answer to one or two sentences. Most children (and adults too!) will not be able to process the complexity of Middle East politics, nor should you attempt to explain them. Children's fears tend to be focused on how their lives are going to change or whether they or their family and friends are in danger. You can help to alleviate their fears by emphasizing that everyone is doing what they can to keep things safe for them here at home.



4. Acknowledge their feelings and do not trivialize their fears. Your child's fears and worries are very real for your child. State the fear back to them, “I sense that you are worried that the plane will crash.” By stating the child's fear, you are telling the child that you know that they are afraid and that it is important to you how s/he is feeling. Then you can give reassurance to the child.

5. Remember your child's point of view. Your child may think that a place that is a half hour drive away is "far away." So when you say that the war is "far away," your child may think it is about a half hour drive away. That's pretty close! Your child may see something on TV or hear something at school that they don't understand or is not factual. Be prepared to handle some interesting logic leaps. Recently, a 9 year old child said, "Iraq is a different country and we are at war with them. Mexico is a different country too. Does that mean that we're going to go to war with Mexico too?"

6. Be sure to watch for signs of stress in your child. Regression, a return to behavior that has been outgrown, may occur. A child may have a toilet training accident, start sucking her/his thumb again, or be afraid to leave his/her parent. Children may have nightmares, more temper tantrums, may grow distant and defiant, or may act out aggressively.

7. Help alleviate your child's stress. Try these methods to help keep your child from feeling the stress and anxiety of war:

- keep home routines as normal as possible
- provide extra quality time or one on one time with your children
- allow children to work out their feelings through drawing or play
- keep the lines of communication open with your children so they can discuss their worries or fears with you

Above all, remember that if something you hear or see about the war disturbs you, then it will most likely disturb and confuse your children. Also, remember to be aware of your own stress level as it will affect your child. Here are some websites that offer more advice on how to help your children cope with the recent events.

www.pbs.org/parents/issueadvice/war

PBS has a wonderful section on talking with your children about war and terrorism. It even has an age-appropriate section, so you know what to expect and how to react to children of different ages.

www.aboutourkids.org

Click on the "At War with Iraq" link at the top of the page. A wealth of specific topics about how to handle children's questions about the war.

www.talkingwithkids.org/television/twk-news.html

Several links on talking with kids about war, violence, terrorism, and TV news.

www.tolerance.org/parents/index.jsp

Click on the link "Talk to Kids About the War in Iraq."

www.nasponline.org

National Association of School Psychologists website, click on "Coping with War and Terrorism" at bottom of page.

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association website. Click on the "Resilience in a Time of War" link.