

Talking with Children about War

Overview

Help for parents on talking with children about war.

- Talking with your child
- Teaching your child
- Your role as a parent
- If a family member or loved one is deployed

The events of September 11 and our government's reaction to declare a "war on terrorism" have prompted many children to ask questions about war. "What is war?" "Why are we having a war?" "Is the war going to be here?"

You may worry about the exposure your child is getting through the media, other adults, or friends at school. You may wonder how much is too much for your child to understand. It's important not to shy away from talking about war with your child. As a parent, you are the best source of information. Talking about it with you may ease the fear and stress your child feels, and may help clarify any misconceptions your child may have or rumors your child has heard.

Talking with your child

Most children over the age of four are aware of the concept of war. They overhear adults talking about it. They may hear other children talking about it or see it on TV. Some children have family members in the military who may be preparing for deployment.

Children, however, don't have the ability to understand war as adults do. Instead, a child sees war through her own eyes, which may cause fears, concerns, and misconceptions about the reality of what is happening around her.

When you begin to talk about war, remember to

- *Try to anticipate the questions your child may ask you.* These may include, "Why are we at war?" "Will the war come here?" "Will I have to go to war?" "Do we know anyone who will be going to the war?" "Will they be killed?"
- *Let your child talk first.* Ask your child to tell you what he knows about war, and about what is happening in the news. You may be surprised at how much your child knows, or you may be alarmed at conclusions your child has drawn. Allowing your child to take the lead will help you give him the most appropriate information and reassurance.
- *Ask your child plenty of questions, such as, "What are you scared of?" "What bothers you most about the war?" "Do you feel sad?" "Do you feel angry?"* Children are not often able to draw abstract conclusions about complicated events like war. For example, your child may conclude that since four planes crashed in the September 11 hijackings, all planes aren't safe. Your child may worry that if you or other family members take a trip somewhere you won't come back. Talking about

2 • Talking with Children about War

your child's fears can help you address these misconceptions. You might also ask questions to find out what your child is worried about.

- *You can help clarify what your child knows by asking questions as well.* If your preschooler asks, "Is this a real war?" you might clarify what she means by saying, "Tell me what you mean by a 'real war.'" Remember, your child's idea of a real war may be very different from yours. Always remember to answer your child's question after she has answered yours.
- *Remember that children tend to look for simple answers.* When explaining the actions of war, you may want to make a distinction between actions such as bombing or killing and a long-term war. Children may assume that the action of bombing a building or country will be enough to resolve the conflict.
- *Keep in mind that if your child avoids talking about war, it doesn't mean he isn't thinking about it.* Sometimes when children are overwhelmed by something, they can't express themselves verbally and may act out their feelings and thoughts in other ways. They may be short-tempered, anxious, have nightmares, or withdraw. Keep in mind that every child is an individual, and that even children the same age may have different ways of processing information and reacting to stress. Pay attention to the way your child deals with his emotions. And look for other ways of interacting and communicating. This could include playing with toys with your child, or watching a movie or reading a book together.
- *Explain that war is a last resort.* You might say, "No one wants to go to war. But sometimes it's the only way to make things better." Make sure to tell your child that war is very different from a fight between two people. Remind your child that most of the time countries can resolve their differences through discussion and peaceful negotiation.
- *Reassure your child that our government and armed forces are working very hard to end the war and that our government will make every effort to avoid hurting civilians.* Explain that we're not going to war simply to get revenge, but rather to prevent further acts of terrorism.
- *Help your child deal with information overload.* Friends, teachers, other adults, and even the media can have a powerful impact on a child's emotional reaction to war. Find out how much information your child is hearing every day. You might say, "Did your teachers talk about war today at school?" "Did your friends talk about it?" "What are you thinking about it?"
- *Don't give your child too much information at once.* Focus on giving your child small bits of factual information at a time, and let her lead the conversation. Watch for signs that you've satisfied her questions and she is ready to stop talking about it for the time being.
- *Listen and learn from your child.* Often a child's simple questions can help bring perspective to adults who are dealing with many complicated issues and emotions.

Teaching your child

- *Encourage family discussions.* Use the time to talk about your perspectives, and encourage your child to share her thoughts and viewpoints, too.
- *Teach your child that many people have different opinions and viewpoints.* Your child might come home from school and say, “Tonya thinks we should drop a bomb on Afghanistan, but I told her she was wrong.” Talk about why your child feels this action is wrong. Encouraging children to discuss the reasons behind varying opinions will teach them to think with an open mind.
- *Avoid placing blame on groups of people or organizations.* Whether you’re talking about events leading up to the war, or answering the question “Why are we at war?” use facts, and avoid stereotyping people or countries. Remind your child that in the U.S. you are innocent until proven guilty. Teach her that not all persons of a faith or ethnicity are “guilty” by association with a nation or religion.
- *Encourage creativity and play.* Drawing, painting, music, playing make-believe, or other creative play can help children process their thoughts and emotions. For younger children who may not express themselves verbally, play can be particularly important. For example, if your child is not comfortable talking about it directly, you might ask her how her dolls feel about the war.
- *Realize the impact this will have on your child.* It’s likely that this is the first introduction to war for many children. What they learn from this experience may help form their views on war for the rest of their lives.
- *Educate yourself and your child.* Look at an atlas or a map with your child. Learn the location of the countries involved in the war. Read books on other cultures and religions.
- *Talk with your child about ways to help.* Your child’s school or class may wish to do a fundraiser or drive for a local charity. Talk to your child about ways others are helping. Encourage your school-age child to write to the President, your Senator, or U.S. Representative about how she feels. Children who can’t write can dictate a letter to you and sign their name.
- *Talk with your child’s teacher.* Find out how the school or classroom is dealing with the topic of war. And talk about what your child learns in school at home.

Your role as a parent

- *Offer reassurance and help your child feel secure.* When children are exposed to violent or traumatic events -- even through the news or media -- they need to hear that “scary” things are not likely to happen to them. Let them know that school and home are safe places to be, and that incidents like the September 11 tragedies are rare. Your child may need to be in more physical contact with you or rely on favorite stuffed toys or blankets.

4 • Talking with Children about War

- *Be a role model.* Children pick up clues from adults, especially when they have difficulty knowing what to do with their own emotions like anger or fear. Showing composure can provide a great sense of security to a child. Make sure comments or actions at home model how you would like your child to behave. Be especially aware of conversations with other adults in cars, on the phone, or in other places where your child may overhear you.
- *Limit exposure to TV and other media.* This is especially important for younger children, for whom the violence in the media can be particularly frightening. If you have an older school-age child, you may want to watch the news together and talk about what you're seeing.
- *Acknowledge your child's feelings.* Instead of saying, "Don't feel sad," you might say, "It seems like you feel sad. I feel that way, too." Reassure your child that what is happening is scary and confusing, and validate your child's many feelings.
- *If possible, spend more time with your child.* Younger children often react to stressful or fearful situations by being more clingy or needy than usual.
- *Maintain routines.* Trying to maintain normal family routines and schedules can be comforting to a child.
- *Increase quiet time.* Add quiet time for the family in the evenings or make reading and quiet time before bed longer.
- *Watch for changes in your child's behavior.* You child may be more aggressive in school, wake up frequently in the middle of the night, be more clingy at home, or cry more often. These are all signs that your child is experiencing stress. Your child may need extra reassurance and support from you.
- *Monitor your child's activities and play.* Your child may begin to act out much of what he is absorbing from other sources.
- *If your child seems to be having trouble coping, seek professional help.* Ask your pediatrician, school guidance counselor, or employee assistance program (EAP) for names of counselors who specialize in working with young children in your area.

If a family member or loved one is deployed

Talking about war can take on a particular importance if a family member or loved one may be or has already been deployed.

- *Let your child know that his loved one is not leaving because he did something wrong.* Explain that it is part of the loved one's job, just as other people go to work every day.
- *Show your child where his loved one is on a map.* Hang the map in his room, with a star on the country or region.

5 • Talking with Children about War

- *Remind your child of all the times people have gone away and come back again.* Explain, if you know, how long the loved one is likely to be away and how you'll be able to stay in touch with them. You might even talk about how to plan for their return.
- *Consider joining a family support group with other families who have sent members to war.* Children can benefit from interacting with other children who are going through similar things.

In order for you to take care of your child, you must first take care of yourself. War can be a tremendous stress on you individually and as a family. Talk with friends and family, and seek professional help if you are unable to cope with your feelings. Contact your EAP or human resources (HR) representative for resources and support.