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Helping Children Cope with War and Terrorism

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War or even the threat of war can be a scary experience for anyone. Children may be especially fearful that threatened or actual military action overseas will result in personal loss and violence here at home. Because scenes of destruction of lives and property have been featured in the news media, particularly following the September 11th terrorist attacks, youngsters understandably fear that “enemies of the United States” can cause harm in this country. For many children, the guidance of caring adults will make the difference between being overwhelmed by these fears and developing effective, life-long emotional and psychological coping skills.

Emotional Responses

Emotional responses vary in nature and severity from child to child. Reactions to what they hear and fear will depend to some degree on age and family experience. Children who have suffered a personal loss from terrorist acts or military actions will be much more vulnerable, as will children who have had friends and family members affected by such events. Also at greater risk are children whose parents are in the military or in active duty in the reserve forces, and those children whose parents are involved in emergency response or public safety. Nonetheless, there are some similarities in how children (and adults) feel when their lives are impacted by war or the threat of war:

Fear: Fear may be the most common reaction--fear for the safety of those in the military as well as fear for their own safety. Children's fantasies of war may include mental pictures of bombs dropping on their home or school, or of soldiers shooting guns. While their worries are probably exaggerated, they are often based on real media images of terrorist attacks or war scenes - either images they have seen on the news or in entertainment programming. When children hear rumors at school and pick up bits of information from television, their imaginations may run wild. Any publicized threat of war or terrorism close to home may also add to their fear. While older children may be able to put such threats into realistic perspective, young children may regard any reference to war as immediate and life threatening.

Loss of control: Military actions are something over which children--and most adults--have no control. Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. Children may grasp at any control that they have, including refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with favorite toys, or leave their parents.

Anger: Anger is a common reaction. Unfortunately, children (and adults!) often direct their anger toward those closest to them because they can't express their anger toward terrorists or countries with whom we are at

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war. Some children may show anger toward absent parents who are in the military, even to the extent that they do not want to write letters or talk on the phone. Patriotism and duty are abstract concepts, especially for younger children who may be experiencing the concrete reality of a protracted separation from a loved one for the first time.

Loss of stability: War or military deployment interrupts family routines. It is unsettling. When their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, children may experience increasing levels of stress and need for reassurance.

Isolation: Some children in military families may feel isolated, particularly if they do not live near other families in similar circumstances. Such children may feel jealous of friends' undisturbed families and may strike out. Other children may have been displaced due to a parent's deployment. Not only do these children experience separation from parents, but they also experience the loss of familiar faces and surroundings.

Confusion This can occur on two levels. First, children may feel confused about terrorism and war, and they may be uncertain regarding what dangers lie ahead. Second, children may have trouble understanding the difference between violence they see as entertainment and the real events they see taking place on the news. Some of the modern media violence is unnervingly real. Youngsters may have difficulty separating reality from fantasy, cartoon heroes and villains from the government soldiers and real terrorists. Separating the realities of war from media fantasy may require adult help.

Parents and teachers can help restore children's sense of security by modeling calm and in-control behavior. It is crucial to provide opportunities for children to discuss their concerns and to help them separate real from imagined fears. It is also important to limit exposure to media coverage of military operations and acts of violence. Parents and teachers can help children by sharing facts about current events and explaining how these events do or do not impact their lives. The amount of detail that children need in order to understand how war might come about and how it might realistically affect their lives will vary with their level of development and personal circumstances.

If your children seem to need help beyond what is normally available at home or school, seek mental health services in your community. School psychologists, counselors and social workers can help identify appropriate services and help with the referral process. For most children, adults can provide adequate support by the following actions:

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Acknowledge children's feelings

Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug and saying “This is really hard for you/us” will work. Acknowledge that you don’t like war either, but we hope that our military can help bring peace to other countries as well as protect our own country.

Try to recognize the feelings underlying children’s actions and put them into words. Say something like, “I can see you are feeling really scared about this” or “It is hard to think that your dad had to go so far away to help our country,” or “I know it will feel great when your mom comes home.”

Sometimes children may voice concern about what will happen to them if a parent does not return. If this occurs, try saying, “You will be well taken care of. You won’t be alone. Let me tell you our plan.” (And be sure there is a plan!)

Some children will be afraid that the United States will be attacked. Acknowledge the reality of their concern, while also reassuring them that our government has taken many steps to prevent war and terrorism here and that the military conflict is very far away. For younger children, saying that you love them and will keep them safe is often sufficient. For older children, you can discuss specifics such as heightened security in our country and efforts to prevent or end the war abroad.

At times when children are most upset, don’t deny the seriousness of the situation. Saying to children, “Don’t cry, everything will be okay,” does not reflect how the child feels and will not help. Nevertheless, don’t forget to express hope and faith that things will be okay.

Older children in particular, may need help clarifying what they believe about war and the role of the United States in the specific conflict. Questions such as, “Could my parent shoot someone?” and “Are we killing innocent people in other countries?” are issues which may need discussion.

Always be honest with children. Share your fears and concerns while reassuring them that responsible adults are in charge.

Help children to feel personally safe

Assure children that our homes and schools are not at risk. Older children might be able to differentiate the concepts of terrorism and war. Only a very few people in the world are terrorists. The war itself will be carried out far away.

Help children understand that precautions are being taken to prevent terrorism (e.g., bomb-sniffing dogs, passport checks, heightened airport security) or attacks on the United States. While these efforts might seem scary or frustrating to children, explain that these precautions might actually make them safer now than they were before.

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Deal with fears such as the end of the world. Discuss realistic modern technology of war versus science fiction. If children are imagining Star Wars-type battles, help them to understand that even the most sophisticated weapons available are not capable of reaching distant targets as seen in the movies. Let children share their fears regarding war in our own country, most of which are unrealistic and stem from rumor, anxiety and fantasy images. Help children to put these fears into realistic perspective.

Let children who are worried about a loved one know that the chance of returning from a war against terrorism is very high. Advances in medicine and technology have greatly reduced potential losses from military actions. Acknowledge that the loss of any life is sad, but that their individual family member is likely to be fine.

If participation in a faith community is part of your family life, talk to your faith leader about how to help your child think about the concepts of death and killing, in age-appropriate terms. This can be very important to calming children's fears for their own safety and that of loved ones.

Try to maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security.

Stop children from stereotyping people from specific cultures or countries. Children can easily generalize negative statements. Be careful that you model tolerant statements and behaviors for your children—they will pick up whatever biases and stereotypes they hear from adults.

Keep adult issues from overwhelming children

Don't let children focus too much of their time and energy on thoughts about war. If children are choosing to watch the news for hours each evening, find other activities for them. You may also need to watch the news less intensely and spend more time in alternative family activities.

Know the facts about developments in the war and protections against terrorism at home. Don't speculate. Be prepared to answer your children's questions factually and take time to think about how you want to frame events and your reactions to them.

Try not to let financial strains be a major concern of children. Although the economic impact of military action may have negative consequences for family income, children are not capable of dealing with this issue on an ongoing basis. Telling children that you need to be more careful with spending is appropriate, but be cautious about placing major burdens on children.

Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. This, too, will help your children.

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Expect and Respond to Changes in Behavior

All children will likely display some signs of stress. Some immature, aggressive, oppositional behaviors are normal reactions to the uncertainty of this situation. It is important to maintain consistent expectations for behavior. Be sure children understand that the same rules apply.

Some children may have difficulty at bedtime, particularly those whose parents are on active duty. Maintain a regular bedtime routine. Be flexible about nightlights, siblings sharing a room, sleeping with special toys, and sitting with your child as they fall asleep. Doing so typically does not cause life-long habits.

Children may play “war,” pretend to blow things up, or include images of violence in artwork and writing. This may be upsetting to adults, but it is a normal way for children to express their awareness and fears of events around them. Gently redirect children away from violent play, but don’t be overly disapproving unless the play is genuinely aggressive. For children who seek pretend play as an outlet, encourage role playing of the doctors, firemen, or policemen. who have helped to save lives. If a child seems obsessed with violent thoughts or images for more than a few days, talk to a mental health professional.

Extra support, consistency, and patience will help children return to routines and their more usual behavior patterns. If children show extreme reactions (aggression, withdrawal, sleeping problems, suicidal talk), talk to your school psychologist regarding the symptoms of severe stress disorders and the possible need for a referral to a mental health agency. These reactions are most likely in children who have had previous mental health problems.

Keep Your School Informed

Parents and other caregivers need to let school personnel know if a family member is called to active duty or sent overseas. Tell your child's teacher if he or she is having difficulties at home and what strategies make your child feel better. Be sure to ask your child’s teacher to inform you of any particular difficulty or change in behavior or performance at school. If necessary, seek the help of your school psychologist, counselor or social worker. Also find out if there are classroom lessons or discussions about current events that you can reinforce at home. It is helpful if teachers and parents keep each other informed!

Adapted from “Children and War-Responding to Operation Desert Storm” by Debby Waddell and Alex Thomas (in Helping Children Grow Up in the 90s, National Association of School Psychologists, 1992) and modified from material posted on the NASP website.

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