

HELPING OUR CHILDREN DEAL WITH WAR

In this time of heightened anxiety over impending war with Iraq, our children are experiencing fear and anxiety too. They're seeing news reports and hearing people around them talk about the war and terrorist threats here at home. But unlike adults, children have little experience to help them put all this information into perspective.

Whatever their age or relationship to adults who are involved in the war effort, children need to be able to express their feelings and concerns about the war. As adults, it's our job to encourage them to talk, listen to them and answer questions they may have.

Things to remember with all children:

- ? Acknowledge children's worries and uncertainties about war. Reassure them that their feelings are normal.
- ? Children's reactions to the war may be heavily influenced by your own. Your reactions are key in helping children decide whether the world is a safe or scary place.
- ? Children need comforting and frequent reassurance that they're safe – make sure you give it to them.
- ? Provide activities for children that help them explore their feelings, such as classroom discussions, informal play, community service projects, and writing, music, art or drama projects.
- ? Maintain family routines and keep the lines of communication open.
- ? Create a family plan to follow in the event of an emergency.

Here are some more tips on how to help children of all ages deal with the subject of war:

Pre-school age children

- ? Reassure preschoolers that they're safe. Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing their fears, staying in touch during the day and giving lots of hugs.
- ? Get a better understanding of their feelings about the war. Encourage them to draw pictures about the war and then discuss them. This offers insight into children's particular concerns or fears.
- ? How you say something is perhaps as important as what you say. Three- to five-year-olds look to their parents and other important adults in their lives to gauge their reactions and decide how they should feel. If they see worry and fear in the adults around them, they are likely to become worried and afraid. But if routine and calmness reigns, most preschoolers will equate thoughts of war with a faraway place.
- ? Don't be caught off guard if certain behaviors reappear or intensify in children. Children aren't misbehaving if they return to bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk or fear of sleeping alone, or if they complain of stomachaches or headaches and don't want to go to school. They're expressing their fear.

Grade-school age children

- ? Expect questions about the war from this age group. Try to answer them in simple and clear language. Use a map or globe to illustrate how far away the war is. Also, explain that the police and many others are working hard to keep us safe here at home.
- ? If a child is concerned about a family member, such as a parent, serving overseas, don't tell them not to worry. Explain that a lot of people are also concerned about Mom or Dad being safe and that Mom or Dad have practiced their job a lot for this moment in time.
- ? Be honest. False reassurance doesn't help this age group. Don't say nobody will die. Children know this isn't true. Instead say, "I will always be here to keep you safe" or "Adults are working very hard to make things safe."
- ? Monitor their television viewing. Limit the amount of war coverage they see. Schedule an alternate activity during the news hour without calling attention to your real concern. A walk around the block, homework, a good movie on the VCR or a fun dinner around the table won't necessarily make kids feel like they're being restricted.
- ? Don't be afraid to say I don't know. Part of keeping an open dialogue with your children is not being afraid to say that you don't have all the answers. When you don't, explain that wars are very complicated and things happen that even adults don't understand.

Middle- and high school age youth

- ? Plan for shared time in front of a reliable national newscast. Because the war will be discussed in school every day, your teen may be more ready to talk when he or she gets home than you'd guess. This is a good opportunity for conversation.
- ? Discussing history with this age group can help put the war and related politics in context.
- ? Get teens to open up about what they've heard each day about the war. Use the opportunity to correct any misinformation they may have acquired.
- ? This age group may ask very technical or even grisly questions that may seem off the wall to you. Take each question seriously and do the best you can to answer it.
- ? Encourage them to work out their own positions on the war – even if it differs from your own. This is an age when kids are developing personal ethics and morals, a process you can support with open discussion and debate.
- ? Create a family plan to follow in the event of an emergency. Make sure that each family member has everyone's phone/cell numbers and knows where to meet. This will make teens feel safer and may help reduce panic if an emergency does occur.

For more information, contact your local Mental Health Association, or the National Mental Health Association at 800-969-NMHA (6642) or www.nmha.org.