

Talking With Children About War

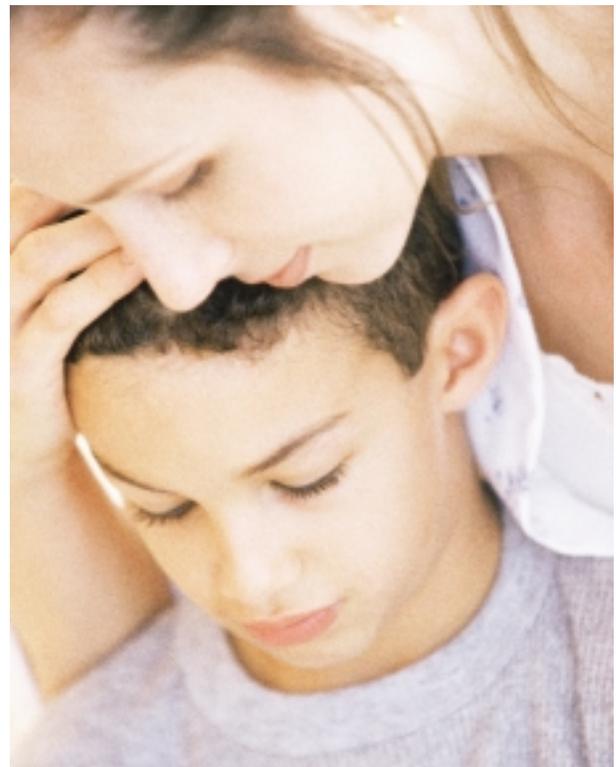
With the initiation of hostilities between the United States and Iraq, the subject of war has crept unavoidably into the consciousness of our children.

Talking to children about war can be uncomfortable and difficult, and recent surveys show that many parents are reluctant to do so. Nevertheless, in our media-saturated world, it is difficult to insulate your children from world events and graphic images that may frighten and confuse them. Even if you are able to limit your child's access to television coverage of the war, it is likely that their friends will be discussing what they have seen, sometimes in great detail.

Also, discussions about the war may be occurring in your child's classroom. Even everyday lessons can trigger questions related to war from curious children. According to a fourth grade teacher from Wisconsin, during a math lesson on time zones, one of the children asked what time it was in Iraq. The class ended up talking about the confrontation with Iraq for over 30 minutes.

How one speaks with one's children about war and other violent events depends on their age and the questions they ask. Tailor your discussions to your individual child. Keep in mind the child's age and personality. Does your child tend to worry and become fearful, or does he or she seem to be interested in talking about the war?

Young children may not talk directly about the war, but their fears may come out in play or drawing. If the opportunity arises and your child seems interested in discussing the war, be certain you have



control over your own emotions on the subject. Showing excessive anger or fear is likely to amplify apprehension in your child. Maintaining a calm attitude lets your child know that you are in control and helps him or her feel safe. It is important to reassure your children that, on the whole, they live in a safe place, that you love and care for them, and that you will do your best to protect them from harm.

Be sure that your child can reach you or another trusted adult if he or she becomes worried or afraid. This may be a time to network with family, friends and neighbors to provide support for your children.

The following guidelines may help you to talk about war with your children:

- Before you can help your child deal effectively with the prospect of war, you must first **deal with your own fears, anger and other strong emotions.**

- **Be available for questions.** Rather than bringing up the subject of war, you may want to wait until your child asks questions. An exception to this guideline is if your child appears distressed and you don't know why.
- **Be honest.** Use words and concepts appropriate to your child's age. With older children, you may be able to share some of your feelings. Your primary objective with a younger child should be to help him or her feel safe.
- **Acknowledge feelings** that your child may have. Listen and don't be too quick to jump in and "make it all better."

Useful web sites:

www.familyeducation.com
www.aboutourkids.org

- Be aware that **your own reactions will have a big impact on your child.** Non-verbal reactions can communicate something totally different to your child than what you are saying to him or her.
- This is a good time to **debunk stereotyping.** Make sure that your children know that their Iraqi or Muslim classmates are not bad or "evil" people.
- **Encourage compassion.** Let your child know about the



International Red Cross and the United Nations relief programs, and encourage him or her to become involved, perhaps by raising money to help Iraqi children.

When children become anxious or insecure, it is not unusual for them to show some behavioral problems, such as.

- Disruptions in sleep or eating patterns
- Nightmares
- Declining school performance
- Clinginess or fear of leaving home
- Disobedience or aggressiveness
- Obsessing about violence
- Difficulty concentrating
- Regression to earlier behaviors, such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking

If your child continues to be distressed or shows ongoing signs of fear and anxiety, seek professional help from your employee assistance program (EAP) by calling **1-800-634-6433**.

1-800-634-6433

Toll-Free U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico
 Visit your EAP on the Internet at www.neas.com