

Children and Fear of War and Terrorism

Tips for Parents and Teachers

National Association of School Psychologists

Terrorist attacks in our country and threats or realities of war are frightening experiences for all Americans. Children may be especially fearful that threatened or actual military action overseas will result in more personal loss and violence here at home. Because repeated scenes of destruction of lives and property are featured in the news media, they understand that “enemies of the United States” can cause harm in this country.

Adults need to help children feel safe at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place. Parents and teachers in particular must help youngsters understand current events factually, how events do or do not impact their lives, and how to handle their emotional reactions. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Children who have suffered a personal loss from, or had firsthand exposure to, terrorist acts or military actions will be much more vulnerable. 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.

All children, however, are likely to be affected in some way by war or terrorism involving our country. For many, the guidance of caring adults will make the difference between being overwhelmed and developing life-long emotional and psychological coping skills. Teachers and caretakers can help restore children’s sense of security by modeling calm and in-control behavior. It is crucial to provide opportunity 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 violence.

Emotional Responses

Emotional responses vary in nature and severity from child to child. 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 predominant 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 a mental picture of a bomb being dropped on their home. While their worries are probably exaggerated, they are often based on real images of terrorist attacks or war scenes. When children hear rumors at school and pick up bits of information from television, their imaginations may run wild. They may think the worst, however unrealistic it may be. Any publicized threat of war or terrorism close to home may also add to their fear.
- **Loss of control:** Military actions are something over which children--and most adults--have no control. Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. These feelings were experienced by most people in the immediate aftermath of

- the terrorist attacks. 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, anger is often expressed at those to whom children are closest. Children may direct anger toward classmates and neighbors because they can't express their anger toward terrorists or countries with whom we are at war. Some children may show anger toward parents who are in the military, even to the extent that they do not want to write letters. Knowing that those who are involved in the military are volunteers only helps to justify anger. Patriotism and duty are abstract concepts, especially for younger children who are experiencing the concrete reality of separation from a loved one.
 - **Loss of stability:** War or military deployment interrupts routines. It is unsettling. Children can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted, increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance.
 - **Isolation:** Children who have a family member in the military, but who don't live near a military base, may feel isolated. Children of reserve members called to active duty may not know others in the same situation. Such children may feel jealous of friends' undisturbed families and may strike out at signs of normalcy around them. Another group of children who may feel isolated are dependents of military families who have accompanied a remaining parent back to a hometown or who are staying with relatives while both parents are gone. 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 terrorist attacks and war, what further dangers might arise, and when the violence will stop. Second, children may have trouble understanding the difference between violence as entertainment and the real events taking place on the news. Today's children live in the world of *Armageddon*, *Independence Day*, *Air Force One*, and cartoon Super Heroes. 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.

What Can Parents and Teachers Do?

Everyone, including adults, feels stressed during times of crisis and uncertainty. If your children or students 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:

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 stop the terrorists or help bring peace to other countries.

- 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."
- Some children will be afraid that the United States will be attacked. Tell them this is a real concern and life offers no absolute promises. Nonetheless, reassure them that our government has taken many steps to prevent attacks from terrorists 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 airports and significant public buildings.
- At times when your children or students 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 does not make them feel better. 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:

- Differentiate between terrorism and war. Our homes and schools are not at risk. 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.
- Deal with fears such as the end of the world. Discuss what realistic modern technology of war versus science fiction is. 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 a result of rumor and anxiety. Put these fears in perspective as to what is realistic.
- 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. Our military is very powerful and many other countries are helping us as they did in the Gulf War,

during which the U.S. lost very few lives. 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. Adding tolerance curriculum to school lessons during this time can help prevent harassment of students and improve their sense of safety.

Help children maintain a sense of control by taking some action:

- Send letters, cookies or magazines to those in the military and public safety jobs.
- Help older children find a family who has a parent on active duty and arrange some volunteer babysitting times for that family or offer to provide meals occasionally.

If a family member is away, make plans for some special activities:

- Gatherings with other families who have a loved one on active duty can help provide support for you as well as for your children.
- Special parent and child times can provide an extra sense of security, which might be needed. Let your child know that you will set aside a particular half hour each day to play. Make the time as pleasant and child centered as possible. Return phone calls later and make your child the real focus of that special time.
- Involve children in planning how to cope. Control and ownership are fostered when children help to plan strategies for dealing with a situation. Children often have practical and creative ideas for coping.

Pay special attention to children who may feel isolated:

- Children who are new in school due to relocation may benefit from a special network of "friends" to help orient the student to new school routines and encourage participation in school activities.
- Children who are one of a few with parents involved in the military may need extra attention to their feelings of separation and fear of loss.

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 under current circumstances, but it is a normal way for children to express their awareness of events around them. Gently redirect children away from violent play or efforts to “replay” the terrorist attacks, but don’t be overly disapproving unless the play is genuinely aggressive. Talk with children about their art or written images and how they feel. Share your reactions. Help them to consider the consequences of war or terrorist acts—what happens if a building blows up or a bomb explodes? For children who seek pretend play as an outlet, encourage role playing of the doctors, firemen, policemen, etc. 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.
- Some children may be at increased risk of suicide because of their emotional reaction to increased stress and any pre-existing mental health problems. Consult a mental health professional immediately if your child shows signs of suicidal thinking or talk, or other self-destructive behaviors. (See www.nasponline.org for information about helping suicidal children.)
- 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, etc.), talk to your school psychologist regarding the symptoms of severe stress disorders and the possible need for a referral to a mental health agency.

Keep adult issues from overwhelming children:

- Don't let your children focus too much of their time and energy on this crisis. 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 the terrorist attacks and resulting military action may result in job cutbacks, or going from a civilian job to active duty in the military may cut family income, children are not capable of dealing with this issue on an ongoing basis. Telling a child 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 and students.

Coordinate between school and home:

- Parents and other caregivers need to let school personnel know if a family member is being called to active duty or sent overseas. Tell your child's teacher if he or she is having difficulties and what strategies make your child feel better. If necessary, seek the help of your school psychologist, counselor or social worker.
- Teachers should let parents know if their child is exhibiting stress in school. Provide parents with helpful suggestions or information on community resources. Maintain general academic and behavioral expectations, but be realistic about an individual child's coping skills.
- Teachers should share with parents information about social studies/history lessons and other relevant discussions that take place in the classroom. This will help parents understand what their children are learning and can foster thoughtful discussion at home.
- Invite parents with relevant professional experience to come to school to talk about their jobs, in age appropriate terms, and how their skills contribute to the war effort or safety at home.
- Create a sense of collective security between home and school. This will help children feel safe and provide a sense of protection.

Resources

There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with the stress of war, terrorism and other crises:

American Psychological Association www.apa.org

National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org

National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

www.ncptsd.org/facts/specific/fs_children.html

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