

Children and Fear of War and Terrorism

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were frightening experiences for all Americans. The potential of the crisis escalating to a military conflict or a large-scale war further adds to people's distress. Children may be especially fearful that military action overseas will result in more personal loss and violence here at home. Because many witnessed on television the destruction of lives and property, they understand that "enemies of the United States" can cause harm in this country.

Over the coming weeks (perhaps months and beyond), adults will 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 what is going on 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, the terrorist attacks 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 careers.

All children however are likely to be affected in some way during this difficult period in our history. For many, the guidance of caring adults will make the difference between being overwhelmed and developing life long emotional/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 vary in nature and severity from child to child. Nonetheless, here are some common reactions when we (children and adults) are impacted by war. (Fear, Loss of control, Anger, Loss of stability, Isolation, and Confusion) Everyone feels stress at times of crisis and uncertainty. If your child seems to need help beyond what is normally available seek professional help. School psychologists, counselors and social workers can help identify appropriate services. For most children adults can provide adequate support by doing the following:

- Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug is often helpful and reassuring. Saying that it is hard for "us" (including yourself) by acknowledging your own feelings, and maybe even your distaste for war as well. But always express your confidence that our leaders will stop the terrorists.
- Always be honest with children. Share your fears and concerns while reassuring them that responsible adults are in charge.
- Older children in particular may need your help clarifying what they believe about war and the role of the United States in this conflict. Open

- discussions about war, innocent people, military obligations and foreign policy are often helpful to help them clarify their thoughts and beliefs.
- At times when your child is upset it may not be helpful to deny their feelings with "Don't cry, everything will be okay." Open and honest discussion, admitting you do not have all the answers, but always expressing hope and faith may be the best route.
 - When having the answer is not possible, merely helping them recognize their feelings as normal and discussing or airing them is the important aspect of parenting.
 - Helping them understand that they have a degree of personal safety, that terrorists are very few in number in the world and that our government is working very hard to catch them and keep them from entering the United States.
 - Stop children from stereotyping people from specific cultures or countries. Children can easily generalize negative statements.
 - If children have unrealistic fears about the end of the world, discuss modern technology of war versus science fiction. Let them express their fears, but put these fears in perspective as to what is realistic.
 - Reassure children who are worried about a loved one returning from a war. Relate that advanced medical procedures and technology have greatly reduced the potential losses for our armed forces. Acknowledge that the loss of any life is sad, but that their individual family member is likely to be fine.
 - Some children may have difficulty at bedtime (particularly those whose parents are on active duty). Maintain a regular bedtime routine. Be flexible about nightlights, or sleeping with special toys and sitting with them until they fall asleep.
 - It is always important to maintain consistent expectations for behaviors. Be sure that children understand that the same rules apply.
 - Keep adult issues from overwhelming children (do not let your children focus too much time and energy on this crisis. You may also need to watch the news less intensely and spend more time in alternative family activities.
 - Coordinate between school and home, let other caregivers know if a family member is being called to active duty or sent overseas.
 - 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 and war in age appropriate terms.
 - Try to maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security.
 - Help children maintain a sense of control by encouraging them to send letters or cards to those working at ground zero or raise money for the relief fund.

