

Telling Your Kids About War

Get Them to Open Up, Treat Fears as Real, Help Them Cope

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"War is never so ugly as when you explain it to children," someone once said.

Talk of war permeates the airwaves. At school, at friends' homes, your child hears about it -- whether you like it or not. What can you tell young ones? Do they really understand?

The word "Iraq" may sound like "a rock," as it did to one young child. "He didn't know it was a country," says Judith Myers-Walls, PhD, professor of child development and family studies at Purdue University in Lafayette, Ind.

"You just can't predict what kids are thinking," Myers-Walls tells WebMD. After the World Trade Center attack, one child saw boaters on the river, and he asked his mother if the boaters were OK. She realized that, while he did not know the world 'hijacker,' he did know 'kayaker.'"

Like all of life's experiences, talks of war can provide teachable moments, she says. "You don't need to go into details, into political discussions. But you do have to accept the fact that kids are aware of things. You can help a child understand how you deal with this world, how you deal with stress."

Look for stress in your child. "Consider your child's temperament," says Jerry Aldridge, PhD, a child development specialist with the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"Some children are more fearful of everything, while others are very outgoing, flexible, and nothing frightens them," Aldridge tells WebMD. "While their basic temperament will not change, the fearful child can feel safer with your help."

Signs of stress: "If she's usually very quiet, but now is antsy, talking a lot," says Myers-Walls. "Or if this is usually a happy-go-lucky kid, but he's become quiet and sullen, there may be something going on. If his eating and sleeping habits have changed, there may be stress. If he starts talking about giving away his favorite things, there's a serious problem."

Get kids to open up. "It's important that kids know they can talk about it," Myers-Walls tells WebMD. "Parents may feel uncomfortable talking about it, may try to avoid it. If the kids haven't brought it up, they don't want to bring it up. But you need to talk about it."

Young children may need help. "Have them draw pictures, describe what's going on in their heads," Myers-Walls suggests.

Accept fears as real. Some parents may feel compelled to "sweep away all the bad stuff," to offer a cookie and say, "You don't have to be sad," she says. "That's being unfair to the child. That can lead to some unhealthy coping patterns. We need to help children accept that we all feel sad and angry at times. When they feel afraid, say, 'Yeah it's scary. Don't tell them they don't need to be afraid. Instead, look at things that make them feel safe.'"

Keep discussions on their level. Children have trouble with abstract thoughts like "it protects our freedom," but they may understand "we have to do something bad to prevent something worse in the future," she tells WebMD. "We can also help our children understand democracy, that it's OK for people to express different opinions. It's not that we don't like our leaders, or are being disrespectful. In a democracy, people are expected to think for themselves."

Explain deployment. When children see other children saying goodbye to family members, it stirs up insecurity. Will their own parents be going next? "It was a common misunderstanding in the Persian Gulf War, and the same problem is happening today," says Myers-Walls. Clear things up for your own child, she says.

If a parent is indeed being deployed, prepare the child. If big brother must go, talk with young siblings. Make sure the child knows it's not his or her fault. "Tell the child that you love them, are going to miss them, that it's not the child's fault that you have to leave," says Aldridge.

Make a video before leaving. "It should be upbeat -- you don't want to leave them crying," Aldridge tells WebMD. "Talk about the fun things you like to do together, the things you will do when you return." Let the child watch it as often as necessary, he says.

Reassure children. Tell them: "We will still eat the same things we've been eating, at the same times. You'll still have to go to school, you'll wear the same clothes." Let children know what's changing, what isn't.

"Young children are concerned about their own health, their welfare, about getting hurt," Myers-Walls tells WebMD. "It will seem like they're settling back into the routine, that they don't need to talk about it. But that child will have questions, concerns, insecurities. And if the parent is suppressing his or her emotions, walking on eggshells trying not to bring it up, they send a message that we shouldn't talk about it."

Teach children to cope. Many parents don't show a lot of emotional reaction around their kids. "I think it's very appropriate to tell kids when you're afraid, confused, angry," she says. "Try to avoid totally falling apart around kids. But it's OK to tell them that you're afraid, that you don't have the answers, that you're confused." Tell them, "Right now I'm upset, but I will be OK," suggests Myers-Walls.

Tell them how you calm yourself -- that you sometimes take a walk, listen to music, read a book, cry, take a bath, make a cup of tea or hot chocolate. Tell them, "I call grandma and talk when I get upset. And you can still come to me when you're upset."

Set a good example. Do something to make "the bad situation" go away. Myers-Walls cites one example: A teacher asked her classroom: Do you think there will be nuclear war in our lifetime? Every child said yes, except one. His reason: "Because my parents are out there every day making sure it doesn't happen." Writing letters to the editor, getting involved in political groups -- these actions give children a feeling that their parents have hope, she says. "They demonstrate that something can be done to change the world."

Prepare to be ambushed. When you're driving them to school, tucking them in at night, that's when kids like to bring up difficult subjects. "It may mean a late bedtime, but it's worth it. If they're ready, that's when you should talk," says Myers-Walls. Why do kids choose drive-time for serious conversations? Because they don't want you looking at them when they're talking, you can't get away, and no one else can hear. Respect that, she says. "You may have to pull over and talk for a bit. But you can still avoid eye contact."

Check in periodically. One poll showed that while 75% of parents said they had talked to kids about war since Sept. 11, 40% of kids said their parents hadn't talked to them about it. "Either the kids forgot, or the parents talked in terms that were too vague," she says.

Turn off the TV. "Too many families, to get the latest news, leave the TV on 24 hours a day," says Aldridge. "That's what happened after Sept. 11. So a lot of children saw the same images over and over again, which was very frightening for them. It's also important for parents to talk to them about what they saw. Young children are very vulnerable, and their sense of security is very important."

SOURCES: Judith Myers-Walls, PhD, professor of child development and family studies, Purdue University, Lafayette, Ind. • Jerry Aldridge, PhD, child development specialist, University of Alabama, Birmingham.