

Dealing with children during times of national crisis

Children are exposed to more visual images and information than ever before. Back in the 1960s and '70, the Vietnam War was confined to the nightly news. Now children see and hear about nuclear war, chemical attacks, see images of victims of such attacks, watch airplanes hit the World Trade Center towers, see the war 24/7 on television and in newspapers and magazines.

As adults, the assault of all these images can be too much to absorb. Consider then how confusing this process must be for a child. Imagine just how a group of elementary students on the school bus are processing this information and the lack of understanding and misinformation that can occur. Maybe Mom or Dad is in the National Guard and is in or going to Iraq. What about the fear that everyone then feels?

There are a number of “normal” feelings children may express. These feelings include fear, feeling out of control, anger, insecurity and confusion. Depending on the age of the child, this can manifest itself in many ways:

Preschoolers:

- More nightmares
- Confusion about where the war is, with no concept of distance and a fear it will be nearby
- Separation anxiety
- Eating patterns changing; for example, not eating well

You can help by:

- Comforting children if they awake from nightmare. Try to avoid temptation of getting into a pattern of having them sleep with you as comfort.
- Reassurance that you will be there for them and keep them safe.
- Eliminate any TV viewing of war or discussion of war with child.
- If they ask questions, keep answers simple. Basic information is just fine.

Elementary-age children:

- They may have a clearer understanding about war, but again, limiting images of war is in their best interest. They may hear about or learn about war in school, which may be a helpful tool for them to begin to process all this information. Be open to any questions your child may have. Older children may wish to talk about issues such as opposition or support of war. Be wise again about how much information your child needs to know or be exposed to.
- Other children, who are less verbal, may internalize stress and act it out in the form of aggression or the opposite, of withdrawal, sadness or depression. Allow the child the opportunity to try to talk about his or her fears and to learn more appropriate ways to deal with their feelings. Consider professional intervention if needed.

In general, try to keep life as normal as possible for the child. If a loved one is serving in the military, consider sending care packages, emails, photos, letters and drawings. Give your child special one-on-one time to build that security and sense of well-being. Keep in touch with your child's teacher so you can partner your efforts in your child's best interest. Keep adult issues from your children and find a support system to help you cope. Avoid over-saturating yourself with media coverage and by all means, take care of yourself, as that will help you be the best parent you can be.