

**INTERNATIONAL CENTER TO HEAL OUR CHILDREN:  
BUILDING HEALTHY MINDS AND FUTURES**

**CHILDREN AND WAR: HOW CAN WE HELP?**

**Is there going to be a war? Will bombs fall on us? Are there any terrorists here? Will I ever see Mommy or Daddy again? Will it be ok? I'm scared.**

Once again, parents and teachers are faced explaining what it means to prepare for and go to war to their children. Understandably, many children feel confused, upset and anxious, especially children whose parents have already been deployed or are directly involved in the war efforts. Kids ask lots of tough questions, but questions about war are some of the hardest to answer. While adults advocate nonviolence in everyday interactions, explaining why nations go to war can be difficult to answer. A war situation, does however, provide a good opportunity to discuss the issues of prejudice, stereotyping, and aggression as well as non-violent ways to handle situations.

Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like many adults, they will get through this difficult time and go on with their lives. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties. As parents, teachers and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner. While there's no "right" or "wrong" way to have such discussions, there are some general concepts and suggestions that may be helpful. These include:

- ❖ Use words and concepts children can understand, based on the child's age, development, temperament, and language abilities.
- ❖ Give children honest answers. Children will usually know if you're "making things up".
- ❖ Children may ask, "Why do we have to go to war?" Why do people kill other people?" Sometimes we don't know all the answers and that is OK.
- ❖ Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
- ❖ Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important.
- ❖ Children tend to personalize the news they hear and may be worried about friends or relatives.

- ❖ Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises.
- ❖ Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about what the school has planned, including any changes to the child's usual routine. Teachers should know about discussions that take place at home, and about any particular fears, concerns or questions a child may have mentioned.
- ❖ Help children reach out and communicate with others. Some children may want to write to the President or to a State or local official. Others may want to write a letter to their friend whose parent may have been deployed.
- ❖ Let children be children. Although many parents and teachers follow the news and the daily events closely, many children just want to read books, play with toys and see their friends. They may not want to think about war.

**NORMAL RESPONSES TO STRESSFUL TIMES**

**Preschoolers (Age 2-6):**

- Uncontrollable crying
- Running aimlessly
- Excessive clinging and fear of being alone
- Regressive behavior
- Sensitive to loud noises
- Confusion and irritability
- Eating problems

**School Age (age 7-12):**

- Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- Appetite changes
- Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams)
- Sadness
- Withdrawal from peers
- Irritability
- Increased fearfulness, fear of the dark, fear of loud noises
- Whining, clinging (reluctance to leave parent or teacher)
- Aggression and questioning authority
- Competition with siblings for attention
- School avoidance, loss of interest and difficulty concentrating in school
- Regressive behavior (e.g., bed wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, carrying an object like a teddy bear or blanket)
- Isolation
- Rebellion at home or school

### **Teen-agers (Age 13-18):**

- ❑ Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- ❑ Appetite changes
- ❑ Sleep changes (nightmares, trouble falling asleep)
- ❑ Sadness
- ❑ Withdrawal and isolation
- ❑ Irritability and acting out
- ❑ Excessive fears and worry
- ❑ Agitation and apathy
- ❑ Risk-taking behaviors
- ❑ Poor concentration
- ❑ Disenchantment (what's the point?)
- ❑ Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness

### **WHEN SHOULD WE WORRY?**

- ❖ Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or more intense reactions to the current situation. These children may need extra support and attention.
- ❖ Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- ❖ Children who are constantly preoccupied with questions about the war should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Signs that a child may need additional help include ongoing trouble sleeping, intrusive thoughts, images, or worries, or recurring fears about death, leaving their parents or going to school. Ask your child's pediatrician, family practitioner or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.

### **What Can I do to Help Reduce Anxiety in a Child?**

As a caring adult, there are many things that you can do to help children cope with the uncertainty that war brings.

- ❖ Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts, feelings or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems.
- ❖ Children learn from watching their parents and teachers and are very interested in how adults respond to events in the world. They also notice changes in routines, and they learn from listening to conversations between adults.

- ❖ Let children know how you are feeling. It's OK for children to know if you are worried, confused, upset, scared or preoccupied. Children will usually sense when something is wrong, and if they don't know the cause, they may think it's their fault and worry that they have done something wrong.
- ❖ Don't let children watch a lot of TV with violent images. The repetition of frightening scenes or confusing information can be very disturbing to children. If your child watches TV, make sure to view it together and talk about what was shown. Ask what your child understood instead of being quick to explain all the details.
- ❖ Help children maintain routines. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays and visiting friends all take on added importance.

### **SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES: CHILDREN OF RESERVE AND MILITARY FAMILIES**

In some situations, members of the reserves maybe called up to active duty. Families with little or no experience with active duty may be experiencing for the first time what many military families experience year round, uncertainty.

- ❖ Check with the Office of Reserve Affairs for support services available to eligible families
- ❖ Find ways that are appropriate and available to maintain communication between the child and parent or other family member overseas, such as through letters, email, and phone calls arranged through the military.
- ❖ Limit sharing all the details released via the media relating to the war efforts to reduce the amount of anxiety your child experiences. It is not necessary for your child to know about every helicopter crash or casualty which can only raise worries, especially for those children whose parents have been deployed.

### **ABOUT ICHOC:**

The International Center to Heal Our Children (ICHOC) is a program of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Children's National Medical Center. The vision of ICHOC is to help foster, promote and maintain the emotional health of our children who are traumatized psychologically by acts of terrorism, violence and disasters.

International Center to Heal Our Children  
Children's National Medical Center  
111 Michigan Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20010  
Phone (202) 884-2434 Fax (202) 884-2368  
www.dcchildrens.com