



By Karen Stephens

Children Need Attentive Support During Wartime

Like most adults, children are well aware of wartime worry and tension. Depending on age, family situation, and exposure to media, some children are keenly aware; others only mildly.

Recently I visited with a 10 year old in Chicago. With television news in the background, I said I hoped he wasn't too scared by all the war talk. Continuing to sift his backpack for homework, he shrugged saying, "Oh, I don't pay attention to those grown ups." I admit it; his nonchalance relieved me.

But some children are working hard to make sense of it all. Their confusion over war issues that are beyond their understanding is heartbreaking. Here's what I overheard as two children sat side-by-side drawing with colored pencils. To respect their privacy, I've changed their names, but not their ages. The time was 10:07 a.m. on February 13, 2003.

Bernice, age 6: "I would die for my country if I had to."

Kevin, age 5: "Yea, if there was a bad guy and he tried to kill people, I'd pick me. I'd tell him to kill me, not my family."

Bernice: "I *really* would die for my country."

Kevin: "If it was between me dying and my whole country dying, I would choose me."

Because, a country is like millions of people, and I'm just one."

Bernice: "Yea."

Kevin: "But, maybe I'd pick my whole country and not me."

Both were silent for a brief moment before they were distracted by an aide's reminder that it was snack time.

That brief discussion makes it abundantly clear that children do grapple with the fall out of war. They need adults to take action. Following are constructive ways to provide children with the support they crave and deserve.

- Maintain regular, predictable routines. Rituals, such as reading stories together, help children feel calm and safe. Plan enjoyable activities to distract children's attention. Spend as much leisure time together as possible so children have lots of opportunities to casually ask you questions.
- Keep the television and radio off most of the time, especially when young children are present. School-age children can benefit from small doses of news. Watch, listen to, or read news coverage together, and then discuss what you've learned. Listen more than you talk.
- When young children see news coverage, explain what they see. Preschoolers struggle separating fact from fantasy, so they can believe instant replays of bombings are continuous events. Clear up such misconceptions.
- Respond to specific war questions calmly in language geared to your child's age and understanding. Giving too little information can confuse children. Giving too much information can overwhelm them. Because they have such different levels of understanding, speak to teens separately from younger children. To build trust, be as open and honest as you can.
- If children are hesitant to ask questions, don't assume they aren't worried. From time to time, ask open-ended questions to invite communication: "I'm wondering, are you afraid war could happen in our town, too?"
- Children may clearly understand some facts, but misunderstand others. Listen carefully and clarify as needed. Be patient if children repeat the questions two or more times. Children grasp abstract concepts gradually.

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- Don't belittle children's fears; accept them as a rational reaction to war. When fears surface, listen and reassure children you will do everything you can to keep them safe. Children of military families need extra assurance during bouts of separation anxiety and worry over a loved one's safety. Recognize and empathize with children's confusion or anger: "Yes, many people are upset about the war. Lots of us are sad for the hurt people; we all want it to be over."
- Give children safe ways to express and cope with feelings, such as through drawing, painting, letter writing, puppetry, or dress up play. School-age children benefit from helping victims. It builds compassion and counters a sense of helplessness. The International Red Cross can give you ideas.
- Be a constructive role model for coping. Make a distinction between your feelings and your child's. If you become overwhelmed, find others to whom you can safely express anxiety, such as family, friends, neighbors, or a counselor.

Symptoms of Overly-Stressed Children

Children often can't put their stress into words. Their behavior speaks for them. The following changes in behavior indicate a child needs extra attention or even skilled outside help: disturbance in sleep patterns, appetite or energy level; regression to bedwetting, thumb sucking, or nervous tics; uncharacteristic separation problems; excessive whining and irritability; long-term poor concentration; unusual and persistent aggression; withdrawal and isolation from friends and family; and apathy or depression.

Recommended Reading

- *The Secure Child: Helping our children feel safe and confident in an insecure world* by Stanley I. Greenspan, MD. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002.
- *What Happened to the World? Helping children cope in turbulent times* by Jim Greenman. Published by Bright Horizons Family Solutions, JPMorgan Chase, Mercy Corps, and The Dougy Center, 2001.
- *Bad Stuff in the News: A guide to handling the headlines* by Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. New York: SeaStar Books, 2002.

Resources for Parents and Those Who Work with Children

- A War in Iraq: Tackling Tough Issues with Kids — About Our Kids.org, New York University Child Study Center: www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war_iraq.html
- Coping with War/Terrorism — National Association of School Psychologists: www.nasponline.org/NEAT/unsettlingtimes.html
- Helping Children Deal with Scary News — Thoughts from Fred Rogers, PBS KIDS/Family Communications, Inc.: pbskids.org/rogers/parents/sept11.htm
- Talking About Conflict and War — The Family Education Network: www.familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,20-6055,00.html
- Talking to Children About War: 20 Tips for Parents — American Psychiatric Association: www.psych.org/disaster/childrentragedy11801.cfm
- Talking to Kids About Terrorism or Acts of War: www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war.html
- Talking to Kids About War — About Our Kids.org, New York University Child Study Center: www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war.html
- Talking with Children About War: Pointers for Parents, The Family Education Network: www.familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,1-4412,00.html
- Talking with Kids About the News — Children Now: www.childrennow.org/television/twk-news.htm
- When War is in the News — Purdue Extension: www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/children/index.html
- The American Psychological Association (APA) announced that it is offering materials free to the public that can help people build resilience in a time of war. The materials will soon be available in print by calling toll-free (800) 964-2000 and are available now for free download at www.helping.apa.org.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.