

Talking with children about war

1. Reassure young children that they will be loved and taken care of. Most young children sense when their parents are upset. Reassure them that, “Mommy loves you. I’m upset about something that is happening very far away. It’s not your fault that I’m worried.”

Children are also aware of their vulnerability and unaware of distance. Explain that the war is too far away for the bombs and missiles to reach us. People would have to drive days and days to get there.

Mr. Rogers’ puppet, King Friday XIII, comforts children when he proclaims, “All children shall be well taken care of in this neighborhood and beyond – in times of war and in times of peace.”

2. Go easy on “positive” promises. Distinguish between hopes and facts. No one can predict the future. You cannot promise that someone in the war zone will be safe. But you can hope they will be safe, and explain what they are doing to protect themselves.

When Molly asks, “Will Uncle Bob die?” you can answer, “We hope he will be fine. Most soldiers come back alive.”

3. Accept children’s feelings. Some parents, in an attempt to reassure their child, may cause more distress. For example, “Don’t be scared. There is nothing to worry about. I will keep you safe.” This answer may cause confusion. If there is really nothing to worry about, why are grownups so upset? Instead a parent might respond, “Yes, war is scary,” and then reassure them that you love them and they will be cared for.

4. Maintain routines. It is important with both children and teens to follow their normal routine as much as possible. Sleep and eat at the regular times. Attend school, sports and other activities as you have in the past.

5. Limit the amount of war news children hear on radio, TV or in conversations. For most children, and many adults, continuous war news and discussion create confusion, anger, or fear.

When children do watch the news, you might ask, “How do you think kids feel about this?” or “I’m wondering what is confusing about this for kids?”

6. Open avenues for discussion. Don’t wait for your child to ask. If children think you don’t want to talk about “it,” they won’t ask. Look for the delicate balance between being willing to discuss events and feelings, and demanding discussion.

Gentle questions like, “I’m wondering what kids your age think about this war?” will be easier for most kids to answer than, “What do you think?” Many children and teens don’t know what they think and others may not be willing to talk about their feelings or ideas yet.

7. Listen to kids. Do not interrupt. If your preschooler has a peculiar view of the world – listen. If your teen’s opinions differ from yours – listen.

Reflect their feelings and worries. For example, “Seems like you’re worried Uncle Matt may be deployed” or “You’re confused. We tell you to use your words instead of fighting, but our country stopped using words and is fighting.”

8. Discuss your feelings about the situation with your children. They need models for talking about and coping with feelings. For example, “I’m

angry about this war. I am upset at solving differences with violence.” Include the different conflicting feelings you feel. For example, “I’m proud

Aunt Patti will help track planes, and I’m scared she will be hurt.”

People who have not had much experience talking about their feelings with kids may find it easier to begin by talking about feelings using books. (See the resources.)

9. Manage your feelings. It is important to talk with kids about your feelings, but avoid “infecting” them with your fears. If you feel overwhelmed,

take steps to get help dealing with your feelings. (See resources for support.)

10. Share with children how you cope with your feelings. Most parents have strong feelings about the war. For example, you might attend a peace rally or march, write a letter to a soldier, organize a prayer vigil, listen to soothing music, get together with comforting friends, clean out closets, etc.

11. Talk about war play and physical violence. Distinguish between what is real and what is pretend. With the increase in war talk, some children want to play war – it is their way of trying to understand what is happening.

Many people feel children’s play helps them deal with the war the way talking helps adults. As long as the play does not disrupt their lives, they believe it is okay.

continued



Other people are uncomfortable “practicing” violence in any form. They may choose to talk about why people (nations) resort to war and what other options are open.

12. Help your children find constructive responses to the war. One way to reduce anger, stress, and anxiety is to do something with your feelings. The activity will be more helpful if it has meaning to your child or teen. Brainstorm ideas or use the list below.

The activities can express your feelings, teach more about the situation, help someone else or channel energy into something physical.

Some possible activities

- Attend a peace march, support the troops rally, or prayer vigil with family or friends.
- Start a journal of feelings or collect poems or drawings about how you feel.
- Learn and practice negotiation skills. (See *Problem Solving Series* by Elizabeth Crary).
- Plant seeds or trees as hope for the future.
- Spend time creating peace in your family: read stories together, play family games, watch a family video, look at picture albums, and talk about the fun and feelings pictured.
- Develop a family structure for resolving conflict peacefully. For example, start a family council.
- Practice talking about everyday feelings. Read stories and play games that share feelings. (See resources.)
- Write letters to national and world leaders explaining your position.
- Organize a bake sale or collect aluminum cans, and give money to the Red Cross.
- Learn more about the people (countries) involved and write a story or play about how things could have been resolved better.

- Draw a picture or make a song about how you would like the world to be.
- Get exercise: walking, running, biking, swimming reduce stress levels.
- Make peace with someone you are mad at.
- Collect newspapers from other countries and see their view of what is happening.
- Write letters to relatives or others in the service to tell them you care about them.

A FEW RESOURCES

Support: Call your local crisis line, children’s or local hospital for information or support. Numbers are listed in your local phone book.

Websites:

www.ParentingPress.com/violence/intro.html

Feelings books and activities available from Parenting Press. See www.ParentingPress.com/index_c.html

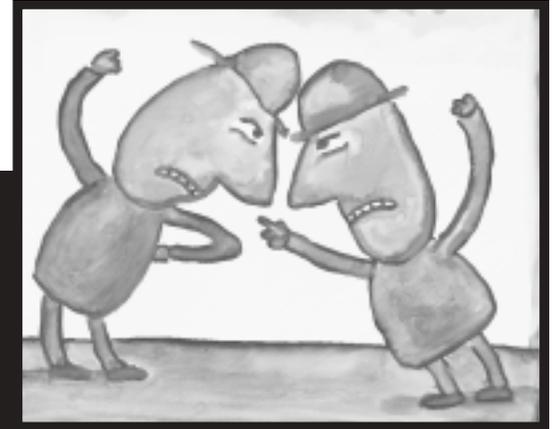
- *All My Feelings at Home: Ellie’s Day* and *All My Feelings at Preschool: Nathan’s Day*
- *Dealing with Feelings Series: I’m Mad, I’m Frustrated, I’m Proud, I’m Furious, I’m Scared, and I’m Excited*
- *Dealing with Disappointment: Helping Kids Cope When Things Don’t Go Their Way*
- *Feelings for Little Children board books: When You’re HAPPY and You Know It, When You’re MAD and You Know It, When You’re SHY and You Know It*
- *The Feeling Elf Cards & Games* and *Feeling Elf Poster*
- *The Way I Feel*

Negotiation & problem-solving books:

- *Children’s Problem-Solving Series: I Want It, I Want to Play, I Can’t Wait, Mommy, Don’t Go, and My Name Is Not Dummy.*
- *Decision Is Yours Series: Finders, Keepers; Bully on the Bus; Making the Grade; First Day Blues; and Under Whose Influence?*

These are available from Parenting Press, P.O. Box 75267, Seattle, WA 98125, or 1-800-992- 6657.

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12 TIPS

Talking with your child about war

- **What is war?**
- **Is Daddy going to fight?**
- **Why don’t they talk it out?**
- **Will the war come here?**
- **Will I be drafted?**

These are not easy questions.

Regardless of our political opinions, our children look to us for emotional guidance.