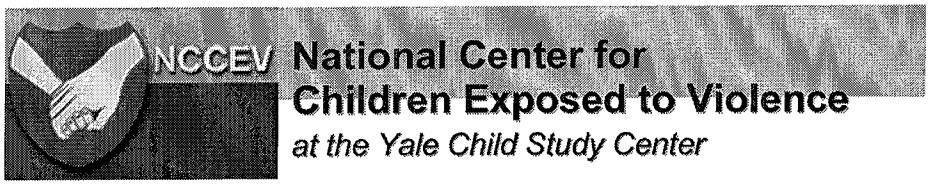

Parents' Guide for Talking to their Children about War

Why should I talk about this with my children?

With increasing news about war and with talk about the threats of terrorism, children, their parents and caregivers may feel uncertain and robbed of a basic sense of safety and security. We all share concerns about the horrors and dangers of war and terrorism. However, as adults and parents, it is our job to help our children and each other cope as best as we can with concerns that will confront us as individuals, families, communities and as a nation.

Your calm ability to listen to your children's concerns is one of the most powerful ways of helping them to learn, understand and feel safe and secure in the most important part of their world---their families.

When using these guidelines what should I keep in mind?

- Children whose family members or friends are directly involved in the war or are in the military will be more directly impacted.
- Ongoing threats of terrorism may add to children's distress related to the war and war may heighten concerns about terrorism.
- Children who have experienced trauma and loss or have longstanding emotional problems are most vulnerable during periods of new threats.
- Reactions will vary from child to child depending upon a variety of factors including their personality, age, developmental level and personal history.
- Not all children will appear to be affected by news of the war. For some children, especially younger ones, it is not helpful to "force the issue" if it does not appear to have an impact.
- When thinking about how to talk to your children, take your lead from them in terms of what they need and what they are thinking and feeling.
- Helping children deal with a difficult event is hard work—parents should seek help and support from other adults when needed.

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New Haven, CT 06520-7900
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What reactions may I notice in my child?

There is no one way in which children express worries and fears at times of greater stress. Here are some examples of how children communicate their upset feelings:

- Irritability or difficulty in being calmed and soothed.
- Tearfulness, sadness, talking about scary ideas or scary feelings
- Anger directed towards specific communities or ethnic groups
- Fighting with peers, parents or other adults or not being able to get along
- Changes in sleep patterns, nightmares or waking in the night
- Wanting to stay close to their parents' or refusing to go to school
- Physical complaints such as stomach-aches, headaches or changes in toileting habits

How can I help my children?

For some children, talking about their concerns with the adults they trust can help them feel less alone. Giving them time to ask questions can be very helpful. For some children, talking might be very hard. Recognizing your children's many different reactions can be the most important beginning to helping your children.

General guidelines

Television and Information

- Watching too much television coverage of war, violence and terrorism, especially graphic images, can be harmful to children of all ages. Monitor and limit the amount of news coverage they watch.
- Pre-school and younger school-age children will be especially worried the more war news they see and hear.
- If your school-age and older child is interested in watching news about the war, watch with them when you can so that you can talk about what you have seen and heard.

Talking about the daily events

- Do not assume that you know what your children are thinking and feeling
- Create a safe and comfortable environment to talk to them.
- Take cues from them in terms of how much they want to discuss what is going on in the world.
- It is important that routine and structure are maintained in children's lives and that they continue to enjoy life, with their friends and family.

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What if I feel overwhelmed?

- In difficult and stressful times, children look to their parents and other significant adults in their lives to know how to cope.
- If you feel overwhelmed or upset, your children are likely to be sensitive to this. Infants and very young children also react strongly to changes in their parents' mood and emotional state.
- If you feel upset and overwhelmed by your own fears and concerns, don't struggle alone. Get the help and support you need from a trusted friend, professional or clergy.

What questions are children likely to have?

❖ *Are we safe and can we be attacked?*

When children ask questions about safety, often they are really looking for reassurance that their immediate world of family, friends, and other important figures in their lives are safe now. The amount of details about safety and security in the broader world that children will find useful will depend on their age. Should these questions emerge, ask first for your children's ideas so that you can respond to the details of their concerns. It is impossible for us, as adults, to predict the length or impact of war, but we can tell children of our hopes that the war will end quickly and that, here at home, parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults including our national leaders are doing everything possible to keep them safe.

❖ *Whose fault is it?*

Many adults have very strong feelings about our country going to war. Parents should respond honestly to questions about their views of the war that their children may ask. Whatever the political views, parents can also remind their children that while it is normal to feel angry in a time of war, it is important to remember that we are not fighting a war with a particular race or ethnic group. The United States is a country that prides itself in having members of many different races and ethnic backgrounds.

❖ *What does this mean to me? How is this going to change my life?*

During stressful times, children may become even more concerned about what affects them personally than usual. Expect your children to think more about themselves, at least at first. Once they feel that their needs are being met, they are more likely to think about helping others. Teenagers may also be struggling with ideas such as being drafted or volunteering. Using available facts and carefully listening to them and engaging them in meaningful conversation may help them make sense of some of those questions.

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❖ ***How can I help?***

Some children may want to express personal opinions about the war or to find ways of helping the country at this time of crisis. They can start by taking care of themselves – telling you what's on their minds, about their views, their fears and their hopes. They can also offer help by listening to the views and feelings of other members of their community – their friends and classmates, their teacher, and other adults. Over time, they can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for our armed forces and their families as well as for the Iraqi children and families who will also suffer the effects of war.

As a parent, how do I answer these questions? I don't want to make things worse, so should I say nothing instead?

Often what children need most is someone whom they trust who will listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – *there is no answer that will make everything okay.* Silence won't protect them from what is happening, but silence will prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that listening, answering, and reassuring should be at the children's own level.

What if this discussion upsets them?

It is important to remember that war is upsetting. While not always easy, talking is an important means of sharing your feelings and learning how to cope and adjust with loss. It is okay if your children get upset when talking about scary or disturbing things. As a parent, you can then reassure them and help them to feel safe and secure. Make sure your children realize it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

What if they don't ask any questions – should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?

When upsetting things happen, it is a good idea to be ready to talk with your children. At first, older children may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is often easier to begin discussions by asking your children what their friends and classmates are thinking, feeling and saying about the war. In most cases it is not a good idea to force your children to talk with you, but instead keep the door open for them to come back and discuss the war and concerns about it later.

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What if my children don't seem upset by events around the war?

Many children may appear disinterested and even irritated by the continued attention focused on the war. The size and scope of a child's world is smaller than that of an adult -- the situation may simply not have affected them directly and they appropriately may be far more concerned about their own life. Young children may not understand, or even know, much about what has happened or what it means. Other children may be concerned, but afraid to ask questions or to share their feelings. Children may visit their concerns briefly, but then turn to play or involve themselves in schoolwork rather then letting themselves feel overwhelmed. Paying attention to changes in behavior and mood as well as asking about childrens' ideas are the first steps to recognizing whether and when they may have concerns about the war.

How do I know if my children need more help than I can provide? Where would I go for such help?

War evokes a range of upsetting but "normal" reactions. If your children continue to seem to be particularly or unusually upset for several days – especially if they are upset or worried about many things, or if they are having trouble in school, home or with their friends -- then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. You may wish to speak with your children's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, or a mental health counselor for advice. Remember, you don't need to wait until your children show signs of being very troubled. Seek advice whenever you think it might be helpful.

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What if I have more questions? Where can I turn for answers?

You may have many more questions or concerns. If you are concerned about your children, please contact a trusted professional in your community. If you would like further information, you may also contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence through our website at www.nccev.org or by calling 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238).

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DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDELINES

- What worries us as adults is probably very different from what worries our children.
- What children worry about will vary depending on their age.
- If you listen to your children's questions and observe their behavior, you will have a better idea of what they are concerned about.
- Because children depend on the adults around them for safety and security, it is important for the adults to take care of themselves in order to take care of the children.

INFANTS

Infants depend totally on the adults who look after them. They sense the emotions of their caregivers and react accordingly. If the adult is calm and confident, the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the infant will feel unprotected.

When adults are overtly anxious and distressed, infants may react. Infants may respond with fretful fussing, difficulty being soothed, or sleep and eating disturbances, or they may withdraw and seem lethargic and unresponsive.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life.

TODDLERS

At this age children have begun to interact with a broader physical and social environment. They still depend on the adults that look after them and therefore will respond to the situation depending on how adults react. As with infants, if the adult is calm and confident, the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the toddler will feel unprotected.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating, sleeping and toileting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. They may also become more passive and withdrawn. It is also very common for children to become more clingy.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life. At this age, children have access to television. Television can generate anxiety because of the repetitive and graphic images it projects. Exposure should be limited as much as possible.

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PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

At this age, children usually have become part of a social group beyond their family. Their language, play, social, and physical skills are more advanced. Through their play, talk and behavior, they show their ideas of good and bad, their pride in all the things they can do with their bodies and their fears about possible injury.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating and sleeping, bed-wetting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. Changes in play and drawings may include more aggression, fighting, or re-enactments of the frightening events. Some children may show their upset through their inability to take part in play and other activities that usually give them pleasure. Children can have difficulties separating from parents or caregivers; they can also make a big fuss about small injuries. Preschoolers may be very preoccupied with questions related to who did it and what will happen to them.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining routines. Caregivers can become aware of the specific worries of individual children by listening to their comments and questions and observing their play and other behavior. Once adults understand children's worries, they can answer questions, correct misunderstandings and offer reassurance. Exposure to television should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect children from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

At this age, children become more independent; they are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings, play with friends and participate in groups. Ideas of what is fair and just become important and they can cope with difficulties with better skills. School-age children are more involved in learning, sports and recreational activities.

Common reactions at this age include a need to stay close to parents and an inability to participate in ordinary activities. They can become too preoccupied with the events and ideas about revenge and punishment. School-age children can, like younger kids, experience nightmares, find it difficult to go to bed or wake up in the middle of the night. They may also change their eating habits. They can begin to have difficulties at school and can become anxious and aggressive.

Adults can become aware of the specific worries of individual children by listening to their comments and questions, or by observing changes in their play and other behaviors. Attention should be given to answer questions with accurate information and relate it to the children's worries. Friends' ideas should be discussed and misinformation corrected. As with younger children, exposure to television news should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect children from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

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ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents can feel out of control due to the many changes that are happening in their bodies. They struggle to become independent of their families and to define themselves. The world of peers and teachers becomes central. It is common for adolescents to have conflicts with parents, teachers and other authority figures. There is a tendency to deny or exaggerate what happens around them and to feel that nothing can harm them.

Common reactions may include a preoccupation with what is happening; they can feel frightened and out of control and may feel completely helpless or imagine themselves as unrealistically strong and powerful. Adolescents can also become even more judgmental and critical of the adults around them and those dealing with the crisis situation. They may also act in ways that can put themselves and others in danger, such as increased experimentation with alcohol and drugs, reckless driving or other behaviors which may serve an attempt to avoid feeling vulnerable and small. When faced with tragic events, adolescents' usual sense that nothing can harm them is lost, making them feel very unsafe.

Adults can help by using the adolescents' more advanced ability to think and talk to discuss their thoughts, feelings and worries. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers and/or with teachers. Adults should be aware that drastic changes in adolescents' behaviors might indicate distress. Forcing adolescents to talk about their feelings may cause more harm than good; instead, adults should make sure that adolescents have a variety of opportunities to talk to whom they want and when they are ready.

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