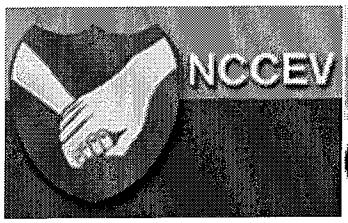

National Center for
Children Exposed to Violence

In the Setting of War:
Teachers' Guide for Talking to Your Students

Purpose:

These guidelines address teachers' questions and concerns arising from the recent onset of war. They offer teachers assistance in the following areas:

1) How to identify and address signs of adjustment difficulties in your students a
2) How to facilitate conversations about the war in classrooms with your students.

While looking through these guidelines, it is important to keep in mind:

- Children whose family members or friends are involved in armed conflict or in military service may be more directly impacted.
- Children who experienced a recent loss or trauma, even if not related to war, may be more directly impacted by the war as well.
- Ongoing threats of terrorism may add to children's distress related to the war and the recent war may heighten children's concerns about terrorism.
- Teachers, parents, and students may benefit from thoughtful discussions about the war and the effects it is having on them.
- Reactions vary from child to child.
- In order to be able to help their students, teachers themselves need to be supported.

What should we expect to see in our students during wartime?

- During war, children may experience a recurrence of some of the feelings associated with a prior loss or tragedy. Children with continuing distress related to 9/11 or other crises may be particularly impacted.

- During war, children may have heightened concern about their personal safety, either related to the risk of terrorist events or representing a more general sense of increased anxiety.

- Reactions of children and adults may vary widely.

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- Some signs of children's distress to look for include the sudden appearance or noticeable change of:

  - Depressed or irritable mood
  - Oppositional and defiant attitude
  - Attentional or other behavioral problems
  - Difficulties with classmates and peer group
  - Social isolation or withdrawal
  - Dramatic changes in academic performance
  - Physical complaints
  - Changes in appetite
  - Sleep disturbances

- The extent and nature of these potential difficulties may be related to many factors, including:

  - Age and developmental level
  - Personal history (e.g., prior trauma, loss, or emotional difficulties)
  - Support from peers, parents, and school staff

- Some children who are not directly impacted by the war may not be interested in discussing the events and may prefer to remain focused on the typical concerns of childhood.

- It is important to find ways within the school to recognize the events without imposing personal emotions or expectations on either students or staff.

- Children do not always demonstrate their feelings directly and we should pay special attention to signs of concern or distress.

- Heightened media coverage of the war and associated events (such as terrorist threats or acts) may increase reactions in children. Parents should monitor and supervise their television watching, and especially for younger children, consider limiting the amount of television exposure.

- The use of live television in classroom settings should be actively discouraged. If appropriate, media coverage can be videotaped and previewed prior to its viewing in class by students.

How can discussion about the war be helpful to children?

- Group discussions facilitated by trusted and knowledgeable adults, such as within classrooms, can be a safe environment where children can ask questions that are personally relevant and come to understand what has

happened and what is likely to happen.

- Discussion allows children to explore how they are feeling, and to think about what might help them feel better. Peers can often provide each other with helpful ways to deal with feelings related to the war.

- Children may have similar needs as adults in times of crisis, but they often meet those needs in very different ways. It is important to find out from your students what concerns they have and how they might feel their needs could be met.

What should teachers keep in mind when conducting these discussions?

- Different groups of children and adults will have different needs and wishes.

- Teachers must remember that children who are either directly impacted by the war (e.g., those who have friends of family members who are involved in armed conflict or in military service) or who have experienced prior traumatic experiences (e.g., 9/11) may have difficulty with discussions about the war. Teachers should not assume that their students could discuss an ongoing war with the same level of objectivity that they might be able to discuss a past historical event.

- Students (and their families) may not wish to disclose to the school that family members are involved in the war or in military service. Teachers should conduct all classroom discussions assuming that some of their students may be personally impacted. While it is helpful to identify children with relevant experiences, it is not necessary nor appropriate to pursue their identification to the extent it interferes with the rights of children and families to maintain privacy.

- Teachers should be careful not to impose their own political beliefs on students.

- Both students and staff may have very different perspectives on the appropriateness of war. These differences of opinion should be respected and attempts should not be made to either actively promote or discredit one viewpoint. Tolerance for differences of opinion should be promoted. Children (and adults) may have different ways of demonstrating their love and concern for their country and may not wish to participate in any one particular patriotic display and should not be forced or coerced to do so.

- Discussion of community assets, strengths and values can be very important in helping to foster children's hope for the future.

- Children may find it comforting if they can figure out ways they can help others at this time. Adults should encourage children to think about how they might be helpful and allow the children to decide what will be most meaningful for them. Although adults can offer suggestions of activities, they should resist the desire of telling students what they should do to provide assistance to others. Activities that promote active student involvement in delivering services (as opposed to solely fund-raising) may be more meaningful to students and therefore more helpful.

- Such activities may occur in concert with activities aimed at helping students understand and adjust to the war.

- It is important to remember that those children who are grieving their own personal losses (unrelated to the war) may resent what they perceive as excessive attention to losses related to the war.

- Students (and staff) may be inclined in times of war to become less tolerant of cultural and ethnic diversity and may view those who are different from them with more suspicion and even frank hostility. It is important to actively challenge these tendencies and to work to promote increased support for individuals of foreign descent. Teachers need to actively work to create an environment within their classrooms and throughout the school where all students feel safe. While children should feel comfortable expressing their views, hostile comments need to be challenged and should not be ignored.

How do you go about planning school activities?

- Begin by initiating conversations with students in groups, such as in classrooms or in after-school groups.

- It is important to involve students in the planning process, but equally as important for us as adults to provide guidance, structure and support to children.

- Consider the children's ages and developmental levels when planning activities.

- If you have a School Crisis Response Team you should use it as a resource when planning your school's response.

- Schools that are affiliated with military bases may benefit form additional services and should collaborate with support staff at the military base to the extent possible.

How can teachers handle this sensitively?

- Activities within an individual classroom may impact other students and staff as well as children's families at home.

- Parents and caregivers should be informed about discussions and activities that are planned.

- School discussions and activities often help to initiate discussions at home where children may be most comfortable talking about the war and their associated feelings.

- Parents should be invited to share with school personnel any concerns or relevant family experiences including:

    - Direct impact on family and friends.
    - Earlier or recent trauma or losses
    - Involvement of family members in other high-risk professions (e.g., police, firefighters, EMS).

- Open discussion communicates to children that adults are available for further discussion and support.

- Any discussions that teachers have with children in the classroom should be conducted as if there were students who were directly impacted by the war or any associated events, even if you are not aware of any – some children and their families may choose to keep their experiences and concerns private.

- Teachers should look for signs of distress in students, such as agitation, acting-out, or other unexpected behaviors.

If you are aware of any children who are directly impacted by the war efforts or who have suffered personal losses (such as related to 9/11) it is important to talk to them and their caregivers, if possible prior to the start of classroom discussions. Students should be reassured that no one will disclose their personal experiences and that there is no obligation for them to share their personal experiences or feelings. We need to remember that many children and their families choose not to disclose personal losses or experiences and make our best efforts to respect their privacy.

What should I do if I find this work difficult?

- Some teachers and staff may find it difficult to discuss the war, especially if they are dealing with concerns about their own family members of friends or if they have experienced personal losses.

- This is difficult work for all of us and we need to think about what our own feelings are in relation to the events.

- Remember that children look to us, as adults, for guidance and support during difficult times. We need to think about how our own reactions may impact the children.

- Providing an opportunity for faculty and staff to talk about their own reactions prior to talking with students may be useful to them personally and will better prepare them to meet the children's needs.

- Children's questions may sometimes catch us off guard and make us confront issues we would rather not think about.

- Adults should seek out support from other adults and colleagues when needed.

- Having a plan to address these concerns in advance will help make the task easier.

- If the task seems overwhelming to you, share it with a colleague, or invite someone else into your classroom to conduct discussions with your students.

Where can I find additional information?

If you have additional concerns please contact a trusted medical or mental health professional in your community. You may also obtain additional information on the impact of violence and trauma on children on the website of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at **www.nccev.org**.