

What Do We Say About The War?

With all the media coverage available these days, there has been virtually no way to avoid having your children be exposed to the war. Here at preschool, the staff and I have been asked multiple times how we're answering the children's questions. In a nutshell, the answer would be we're being honest, yet taking the lead from each of them at their apparent level of understanding.

At a recent training institute, I met Karen Stephens, a writer for Child Care Exchange magazine and director of the Illinois State University Child Care Center. I hope the following excerpts from e-mails with Karen, discussions with fellow early childhood professionals, and the April edition of Chicago Parent, are of benefit to you.

*Keep the TV and radio off most of the time children are present. Young children have difficulty separating facts from fantasy and do not yet understand geographic details. They can believe bombings are local, continuous, or even a game. School-age children can verbalized their fears and would benefit from discussing small doses of new coverage you've seen together. With your help, they could relate it to already known information.

*Maintain your regular, predictable routines such as dinner, bath, and reading together before bed. There is a sense of security to having such a routine. Children often can't put their stress into words. Their behavior may speak for them showing disturbance in sleep patterns, uncharacteristic separation problems, bedwetting, unusual and persistent aggression, or even loss of appetite.

*Respond to specific war questions calmly and in language geared to your child's age and level of understanding. Children may understand some facts clearly, but misunderstand others. Listen carefully and be patient if your child repeats the question. They may need an answer re-worded in order to grasp the concept.

*Don't belittle children's fears; accept them as a rational reaction to war. Provide assurance that you will do everything you can to keep them safe. Recognize and empathize with your child, offering comments such as, "Yes, many people are upset about the war. Lots of us are sad for the hurt people." Be a constructive role model for coping. If you are feeling overwhelmed, find others to whom you can safely express your own anxiety such as family, friends or medical professionals.

*Give your child opportunities to express their concerns and feelings through toys, art, dolls, puppets and/or manipulative materials. Ask them to tell you about their play. (While shopping last weekend, I noticed those little green plastic military figures now are made in sand color too!)

*Be honest with your child. Almost everyone knows someone involved in the military or government. Children may overhear conversations and need answers in order to clarify what they've heard. The unfortunate fatalities of war may be your child's first exposure to death. However, it may be the beginning of understanding how to cope in a similar family situation.

Since 9/11, many books and web sites are available for more information. A few are:

What Happened to the World? Helping children cope in turbulent times, by Jim Greenman

The Secure Child: Helping our children feel safe and confident in an insecure world, (Perseus Publishing 2002)

www.familyeducation.com

www.aboutourkids.org

www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism

www.childrennow.org

*Communicate with others who care for your children. You may be the only one who knows that they are upset or have been asking questions. Everyone can be reassuring, understanding, and supportive for yours and your child's benefit. We know of many health professionals and resources if needed.

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