

Children's reactions to war and uncertainty

A guide to helping your child

In times of international conflict and uncertainty there may be anxiety and fear among parents and children. Some children will be curious about war, others will express anxiety and some will show little or no awareness or interest. The differing responses, often due to the age of the child, provide a challenge for parents to meet the individual needs of their children. The guidance of caring adults, parents, caregivers and teachers will make a significant difference for children as they endeavour to make sense of the current situation. By being calm and reasonable, parents can reassure children that they are safe and help them to make sense of what is happening.

This fact sheet provides some tips on how you can help your children through times of international conflict and uncertainty, if it is of concern to them or you are concerned about your child's reactions.

Parents

You as a parent or a significant adult in the child's life are central to the child's world. They will look to you for guidance and support. It is important for parents to ensure that their own needs are met. Before discussing war or terrorism with children, it is important to consider:

- How am I feeling about this?
- Am I going to be able to provide support to my children?
- Am I informed enough to present a calm and reasonable response to my kids?
- Who can I talk with to help me make sense of the situation?

There is a range of supports which adults use to help them order their own thoughts. Be informed about what is happening through newspapers, websites, radio and television, but be careful about

your own exposure to the events. Talking through the issues with friends, family and colleagues can help. Others seek the support of clergy or their local doctor or their child's teachers or caregivers.

There are counselling services available if your reactions are very strong and you feel as though they are impacting on the way you live your life. Your local doctor can help you find a local counselling service, or you can talk to your local Department of Human Services office. You may also prefer to talk to the a telephone counselling service, like Lifeline.

Children

Of utmost importance in discussing issues with children is the underpinning of honesty.

Some children may express fear that they will be bombed, younger children may have difficulty in identifying that war is unfolding in another country that is distant from Australia. Watching the events on television brings the danger into the lives and homes of children.

The developmental age, stage and temperament of the child will influence each child's questions, interest and understanding. Young children are learning the concepts of time and space, and they may need reassurance of where the war is in relation to Australia. They may personalise war and think that armed conflict will happen to them and those they love. Some children will be anxious about the safety of their parents and show signs of reluctance to go to school, wanting to be with their parents instead. Reassure children that they are safe and keep to usual routines as much as possible - predictability is reassuring.

Primary school age children may have more specific questions and will be grappling with their own moral questions about war. They will have a deeper understanding of the humanitarian and social consequences of war, including the threat to them. Answer questions honestly but without providing more information than is being asked for. Children need to know that there is hope and that they can take positive action such as donating to humanitarian causes. It is important to remember that children will look to significant adults to gauge safety and threat.

Concerned adolescents will need reassurances that war will not last forever and that there are efforts being made to negotiate peace. Help teenagers to describe their thoughts and feelings, model tolerance, and promote thinking about recovery and ways in which we can make a difference.

There are children in our communities who have been directly involved in conflict previously. These students will need support and understanding from their school and broader community. Some will be witnessing events unfolding in towns they know or where relatives live.

Reactions

Some reactions to situations when children experience uncertainty or crisis may include:

- preoccupation with war and terrorism and wanting to talk excessively about it
- excessive concern for others and anxiety about loved ones such as: "Will daddy's office be bombed?"
- clinging to family or familiar things, maybe needing familiar objects for security

- changes in relationships with parents, becoming more demanding, possessive, withdrawn or communicative
- sleep problems, nightmares, reluctance to go to bed or get up
- changes in dressing, eating and toilet habits
- irritability, uncooperativeness, listlessness or boredom
- inability to cope with change or ordinary problems
- reverting to immature behaviour or habits that they had grown out of
- reduced concentration, school performance, or ability to play constructively
- overactive behaviour, restlessness or dissatisfaction
- small ailments or injuries exaggerated or used to get comfort or security.

What you can do to help your children

- Children need protection from distressing images and verbal reports and should not be exposed to graphic images on television. Where there is a television showing news footage of war or acts of terrorism, be with your child to help them make sense of the situation. Monitor their reactions, understanding and concerns. They need your perspective, guidance and reassurance.
- As well as keeping an eye on what your child is seeing or hearing through media reporting, you need to be aware of what your child is being exposed to through conversations they may overhear or have with friends, conversations in the school yard, or classroom discussions.
- Check with them to see how they are going. You can help by reassuring them that they are safe.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings, thoughts and concerns. Don't dismiss their issues as trivial or not worth talking about as this only promotes the belief that this is too awful to talk about. Acknowledge concerns that are real, and correct misconceptions.

- Listen carefully to what the child is asking in order to gauge what they really want to know.
- The important thing is to speak calmly and carefully with children about their concerns, using the point of understanding that they have to guide what is said.
- Maintain routines - this is reassuring to children. When anxious, overwhelmed and uncertain, children need to be surrounded by predictability, trust and most of all, honesty.
- Children and adults will be experiencing a range of emotions: fear, anger and sadness. Taking action is a way to reduce the helplessness. It is useful for children to take action to help make things feel better. Activities such as collecting funds for people in need remove the feelings of helplessness and promote a sense of purpose.
- In times such as these we say more about war than peace. During times of international conflict children see many examples of solving problems with force. Discussing how to solve conflict with solutions that rely on understanding and negotiation can reinforce the use of peaceful solutions.
- It is helpful to tell children that people are working on finding a peaceful solution and that there are humanitarian efforts underway to help hurt and displaced people.
- Encourage children to continue to be children, to play to laugh and explore. Do fun things with them. Be with them.

For further information

Talk to your school or local doctor.

Visit the following websites:

Department of Human Services
Emergency Management
www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency

Victorian Parenting Centre
www.vicparenting.com.au

Australian Psychology Society
www.psychsociety.com.au

Other fact sheets in this series include:

Stress after emergencies

Children and crisis

Family and crisis

Teenagers and crisis

When someone you know has had a traumatic experience

The stress of being under threat

Remember that you, your family, your community are not alone; support will be available through agencies coordinated by the Victorian Department of Human Services:

Lifeline	13 11 14
Parentline	13 22 89
Kids Help Line	1800 55 1800

Department of Human Services Offices

Metropolitan

Eastern Region	9843 6000
North and West Region	1300 664 977
Southern Region	9213 2111

Country

Barwon-South West	5226 4540
Gippsland	5177 2500
Grampians	5333 6669
Hume	5722 0555
Loddon-Mallee	5434 5555

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<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency>