

# Parents Can Help Children Cope With War Fears

by Charlotte Peterson

**How** can we help our children deal with what is currently happening since September 11<sup>th</sup>, especially when it is so hard for us as adults to accept what is happening in the world?

Important goals now are to help our children feel safe, secure and remain hopeful. Self-confident people are most able to face problems, cope with fears and offer creative solutions to themselves and others. Children and adults who become debilitated by their fears usually either become more aggressive, or sink into hopeless, helpless despair. Children need to see their parents staying informed, remaining confident and committed to keeping their children safe.

This does not mean that parents should hide their own sadness and fears but rather avoid emotional intensity that could be overwhelming to their children. Don't expect to explain away children's fears, but instead validate their feelings and offer comforting information. Talk about the fact that people in Afghanistan and Israel are scared too. All parents in the world are doing their very best to keep their children safe right now.

Honesty is important, but avoid over stimulation. Be factual without resorting to details of horror. Assume that your children are paying attention to information about the war; it is unrealistic to think that they aren't noticing. When children see pictures of demonstrations, point out that so many people in the world are doing their very best to try to end this conflict as soon as possible, even if they disagree on how best to do that.

Save the news broadcasts to keep you informed, but remember that kids can be flooded and frightened by these reports. Children have much more vivid imaginations than adults and far fewer coping skills. It is considerably better to screen the news and offer children information that is age-appropriate.

Reassure your children that everyone in the world wants war to end as quickly as possible. Discuss that there have been other wars (when you were a child, when their grandparents were children, etc.), all of those wars did end, and the countries worked out a way to cooperate afterward.

Whether you believe there should have been a war or not, it is helpful to explain both sides of the conflict. Talk about different ways to resolve such a conflict. Avoid using "good guys" and "bad guys" statements, which are too simplistic and promote war as the only solution to world conflicts.

At different ages, children have differing abilities to cope with fears, needs to be protected and ways of understanding information. It is important to edit information to meet a child's particular age, personality and needs.

**Below age 7:** Young children believe that their parents are all-powerful and will protect them. Their biggest fear is of being hurt or separated from their parents. The basic need of children this age is trust and security. They need to be given simple explanations and assured that they will always be taken care of and kept safe. Steer children away from any movies that involve

abandonment themes; e.g., “Bambi,” “Dumbo,” “Fox and Hounds,” etc. They don’t need added stress right now.

**Ages 7-12:** School-aged children think more logically, will be exposed to more information, but do not have many coping skills to work through their fears. Discussions as to their thoughts and feelings are important. Involvement in some special activity can help these children feel empowered; e.g., making a poster for a window in your home, writing a letter to the president or to someone in Congress, being involved in a peaceful demonstration, etc. This is a period of idolizing heroes and reading biographies of important people who helped make the world safer can be comforting; e.g., Harriet Tubman, Cochise, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, etc.)

**Teenagers:** This age group will be directly affected by fears of being drafted or having friends go to war. Engage them in open conversations about war; suggest that they talk to relatives and friends who have been in a war. Also discuss alternative service and conscientious objection; it is important that they be aware of all aspects of service to one’s country. Use this as an opportunity to help your teen understand her own beliefs and values, develop tolerance for other ways of thinking, learn about injustice and take action in ways that feel comfortable.

Many children, although troubled themselves about war, will try to protect their parents by not bringing up their worries or by saying that they aren’t worried in an attempt to reassure their worried parents. Parents need to initiate discussions and provide age-appropriate information and reassurance. Because young children take things very literally, a comment by an adult such as, “I don’t know how this war will ever end,” might cause a child to believe that the war will continue throughout his entire lifetime.

Children, who have a parent, relative or close friend in the military will have special needs. Give more detailed age-appropriate information more often. Remind them of all the people working to end this war. Help children draw pictures, write letters or make a video of things that the loved one might be missing. Be sure they know that no matter what happens, they will always be loved and cared for, let them know who their godparents or guardian would be if anything happened to both parents.

One of the most important ways you can help your child be less fearful during these trying times is for you to be as informed as possible. Read newspapers and magazines, watch news reports and get involved in some way that feels useful. Remember that we are strong role models for our children. If we can show our children that we are doing our best to keep them safe, then our children can continue to feel cared for, secure and look forward to tomorrow.

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