

Talking to Children
Immediately Following Traumatic Events

- Be aware that children will have information—they hear it from teachers, peers, media, etc. Our role is: (1) to make sure that information is correct and (2) prevent children from drawing catastrophic conclusions from the information. How can we do this?
 - Ask questions. Find out what the children know, where they got the information, who it is about, etc. It is important to know whether they know someone directly involved or have known someone involved in a previous conflict.
 - Minimize exposure to the media. Media exposure has been associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression among children and adults.
 - Only provide answers to questions; don't give children more information than they are asking for. Tell the truth, using language that is developmentally sensitive.
 - Remind children that they are going to be safe on multiple levels: parents, teachers, community members (e.g., clergy, neighbors), police, president, etc. are all working to keep children safe.
 - Children react to news about war in a variety of ways. They may be scared, revisit their past traumas including 9/11, become hopeless and depressed, withdraw from other people, and/or act up. Children are more susceptible to having these reactions if they had mental health problems prior to the news about war, are experiencing other major life stressors, are lacking social support, have few coping skills, or have parents who are struggling emotionally. Younger children appear to be more vulnerable, possibly because they are trying to comprehend more than they can developmentally.
- What else can we do?
 - Maintain the routine with flexibility.
 - Parents need to take care of themselves. You are the best role models and sources of support for your children. Of course, you want information about the war—that's understandable. Just be sure to gather the information in private and be careful about how much the children know. It is okay to tell children you are thinking about the soldiers and want everyone to come home safely. It is okay to seem worried or even tear up a little. The key is remaining in control. Children become very fearful when their caregivers seem helpless and hopeless.
 - Connect with loved ones for social support.
 - Remind children about coping skills that have worked for them at other times that they were scared, angry, etc. (e.g., talking with parents, teachers, or friends, reading, exercise/sports, art)
 - Discourage maladaptive behavior, such as fighting, drinking, smoking, or using drugs.

Check out two articles, "A War in Iraq: Tackling Tough Issues with Kids" and "Talking to Kids about Terrorism or Acts of War", on aboutourkids.org.