

# Helping Children Cope During Times of War

During times of war, parents often struggle to talk to their children about this sensitive issue and ease their anxieties and fears. This guide provides information on how children may react to the realities of war, and how you can help support them during difficult times.

*Note*—This guide is for informational purposes only; use this as a guideline and adapt it to the unique needs of your family and children as you see fit. If a family member has been called to military duty, this piece may be too general for your purposes; however, you may benefit from a LifeCare® Guide: *Coping With Military Deployment*.

## How Children May React to the Threat or Reality of War

Children's reactions to stressful events vary; however, there are similarities across all ages when their life is impacted by war or the threat of war. For instance, children may experience some of the following reactions:

- ♦ **Fear**—A child may be afraid for his or her safety as well as those in the military. Some children may create fantasies about war and, for example, fear a bomb will be dropped on his or her home.
- ♦ **Loss of control**—Children may experience a strong sense of helplessness. They may be confused over why military strikes are happening and feel they cannot do anything to stop it. A child may attempt to regain some control by refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with a toy or leave his or her parents.
- ♦ **Anger**—A child who is experiencing anger toward the people or country(ies) with which we are at war may redirect those feelings of anger at a classmate, parent or neighbor because he or she is unable to express them in other ways.

- ♦ **Loss of stability**—War interrupts everyone's routine and changes how we respond to daily life. Children may feel a sense of increased stress and need more reassurance since their usual activities may be disrupted.
- ♦ **Isolation**—If a child has a family member called to active military duty, he or she may feel alone if he or she does not know other children who have a parent in that situation. These children may also feel anger or jealousy toward friends whose family has remained somewhat intact and normal.
- ♦ **Confusion**—Children may be confused about the violence and when it will stop. They may also confuse reality with entertainment since many children are exposed to violent movies and television programs.

(The above information was adapted from the National Association of School Psychologists article, *Children and Fear of War and Terrorism: Tips for Parents and Teachers* 2001.)

Keep in mind, however, that children's reactions can vary dramatically depending on their personality, age and maturity level. The following information may help you understand how children of different ages may react to war. *Note*—If your child is exhibiting any extreme behaviors that may indicate he or she is having difficulty coping, consult a pediatrician.

## Infants/Toddlers

Even infants and young children can be affected by the current events. While they are too young to understand the situation, they may pick up on the anxiety parents and caregivers may be feeling. Infants and toddlers may react to this by frequently crying, hitting, having mood swings or nightmares. While infants and toddlers do not need a detailed explanation of what is happening in the world, they do need to feel a sense of security. The following tips may help you lessen anxiety and make your child feel safe and secure:

- ◆ Make sure your child is supervised at all times. If you are unable to be with your child, ask trusted friends, relatives and caregivers to help out. Unless imperative, this may not be the best time to introduce new caregivers, which can compound your child's feelings of anxiety.
- ◆ Hold and comfort your child as much as possible—especially when he or she is crying or upset.
- ◆ If your child is playing aggressively, redirect him or her to positive activities such as blowing bubbles, splashing in a pool/tub, coloring, or whatever activity your child finds enjoyable and relaxing.
- ◆ Speak in soft tones and be as calm as possible around your child.
- ◆ Give your child a lot of attention, and offer a blanket or special stuffed animal, bottles and snacks to help soothe your child.
- ◆ Play soft music or read to your child.
- ◆ Try to avoid watching or listening to news coverage of the unfolding events in front of your child.
- ◆ Keep bedtime routines consistent. If your child is having trouble sleeping, allow him or her to share a room with a sibling, use a nightlight, sleep with a special toy or stay with you until he or she falls asleep.
- ◆ Look for nonverbal indicators that your child may be having difficulty coping, such as facial expressions or posture and play behavior, as well as your child's verbal tone or content.
- ◆ Spend extra time with your child, if possible. When you don't know what to say, many times simply hugging your child will help.
- ◆ Ask your child about his or her feelings. Explain that it is normal to feel confused, sad or scared. Acknowledge that you don't like war either and that you hope the military can address the situation.
- ◆ Assure your child that he or she is safe and that you are nearby to protect him or her.
- ◆ Do not pressure your child to discuss how he or she feels about the news or war. Each child will react differently and some will want to talk, while others will want to be distracted and return to a normal pattern.

Additionally, communicate regularly with caregivers and ask them to tell you if your child seems to be reacting to stress.

### Preschoolers (Ages Three to Five)

Preschoolers may be upset by what they see and hear since children of this age tend to confuse facts with fantasy and fear of danger. They can be easily overwhelmed and do not have the ability to keep perspective of the situation. Preschoolers may react by exhibiting regressive behavior (such as excessive clinginess, bedwetting or thumb sucking) or expressing fear of strangers, animals, darkness or “monsters.” Other common signs of anxiety include unexplainable aches and pains, disobedience, hyperactivity, choosing adults over same-age friends, increased acts of aggression, nightmares and withdrawn behavior. To help your preschooler cope with his or her feelings, the following tips may help:

- ◆ Try to keep daily life as normal as possible and stick to regular routines. Children find routines comforting.

### School-aged Children (Ages Five to 12)

It may not always be possible to judge if or when your child is scared or worried about war. Children may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not realize how the news is affecting them. Parents can look for clues as to how their school-aged child is reacting by observing their behavior. Signs that may indicate your child is upset include: becoming more easily upset; excessive crying, whining or irritability; a lost sense of trust, especially of adults; unexplainable stomachaches, headaches or other illnesses; and an increase in problems at school, such as difficulty with assignments, unwillingness to go to school or odd complaints about school and/or teachers. Keep in mind, that playing “war” games does not necessarily mean that your child is upset about the possibility of war. Playing these types of games is normal behavior for school-aged children, and it is also a healthy way of dealing with the news or attempting to problem solve. The following tips may help school-aged children adjust and understand what is meant by war.

## Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

If you or your child needs help coping with emotions, consider speaking with a mental health professional and/or ask if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, grief, dealing with violence and more.

- ◆ Do not overexpose your child to television, adult conversation, or strong opinions that he or she may not understand or find upsetting.
  - ◆ Set aside an hour each day to spend with your child. Do something fun and focus your attention entirely on your child.
  - ◆ Take your child to the local library. Libraries have many books that can assist children in understanding war.
  - ◆ Look at maps and show your child areas of the world that are affected. It may help your child understand the situation to visually see the countries that are involved.
  - ◆ Consider having your child draw pictures or write letters, which may describe his or her reactions to war. This will give you a chance to explore your child's emotions and it creates an opportunity to discuss how your child is reacting to the possibility of war.
  - ◆ Stay positive. Talk about the firefighters, police and government and how they are doing everything they can to keep us safe.
  - ◆ Be honest and share your fears and concerns while reassuring your child that responsible adults are in charge.
  - ◆ Talk to your child's teachers/school to understand how they are talking to children about war. Do your best to keep your messages consistent.
- ## Adolescents (Ages 13 to 18)
- Adolescents typically react similarly to adults when hearing news about the possibility or reality of war. They tend to personalize news, reflecting on and relating it to events in their own lives, and may re-examine their priorities and interests. Younger adolescents may withdraw, resist authority and become disruptive at home or in the classroom. Older teens may consider war as a political issue, and have strong opinions on the matter. Signs that indicate your teen may be experiencing anxiety about war include: exhibiting vague physical complaints; abandoning chores, schoolwork and other responsibilities; misdirected anger; acting-out behavior; low self-esteem and self-criticism; and loss of interest in regular habits or activities. To help your adolescent cope with the news of war, consider the following tips:
- ◆ Watch the news or read newspapers together. This may help you understand your child's reactions, answer any questions, and respond to your child's fears.
  - ◆ Ask your child how he or she feels and answer questions as honestly as you can. Try to focus on the facts and dispel any myths.
  - ◆ State your opinions, but remain open to other opinions. Discussions should allow for disagreement and airing different points of view.
  - ◆ Be prepared for questions such as, "Could you shoot someone?" or "Are we hurting innocent people in other countries?"
  - ◆ Encourage your child to create a journal to document his or her feelings. It may also help to include newspaper or magazine articles to historically document the event.
  - ◆ Suggest your teen organize or join a discussion group at school or your religious organization. Discussing the situation with peers can help a teen create a forum to express his or her feelings.
  - ◆ Talk to your child's teachers to understand how they are talking to children about war. Do your best to keep your messages consistent.
  - ◆ Remind your child to be tolerant and respectful of differences in culture and religion.

- ◆ Reassure your child that everyone (government, schools, parents, etc.) is doing everything possible to keep him or her safe.
- ◆ Encourage your child to get involved with volunteer or relief efforts.

## Discussing War With Children

Oftentimes it may be difficult to know how or when to talk to your children about war and violence. When discussing the subject with your children, remember that age and individual personality influences how children react to what they hear and see in the newspapers and on

### How Your Child Can Help Others

Children are often comforted by helping others. Here are some ways your children may feel as if they are making a contribution:

- ◆ Suggest your child send letters to those in the military as well as those in public safety jobs.
- ◆ Help your child organize a fundraiser to support relief efforts or children in other countries involved in the conflict.
- ◆ Help families that may be directly affected by a loss (or military deployment) by helping prepare meals, assisting with yard work, babysitting, etc.
- ◆ Suggest they set aside some money each week (from their job or allowance) to donate to a charity organization.
- ◆ Encourage older children to donate time to a charity organization such as the Salvation Army.

television. If you feel your child is mature enough to handle discussions about war, the following general tips may help:

- ◆ Conduct an open, honest discussion with your child and allow for disagreement and different points of view.
- ◆ Encourage your child to express his or her own opinion and feelings about the situation but correct any misinformation without making your child feel he or she is wrong.
- ◆ Communicate the importance of tolerance and diversity and do not make generalizations about certain groups or people. For more information on talking to your child about tolerance, please refer to *A LifeCare® Guide: Diversity and Tolerance*.
- ◆ Explain that war can stem from personal conflict, misunderstanding or differences in religion and culture. Use personal situations to help illustrate your point.
- ◆ Encourage non-violent behavior by asking your child how he or she would handle conflicts with siblings, schoolmates or friends. Provide non-violent solutions such as talking things out, writing letters, telling adults, etc.

Regardless of your child's age, remember that your children will look to you for emotional support and cues. If you are overly anxious or fearful, your children will probably feel the same way. If you need help coping with your emotions, consider speaking with a mental health professional and/or ask if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that can help. Similarly, pay close attention to your child's behaviors. If you notice any extreme behaviors (excessive crying, aggression, etc.), contact your child's pediatrician.

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