

# Helping Children with Anxiety Talk About War & Terrorism

by Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D.

## Share Your Feelings with Your Children, But Maintain Your Composure

When talking to children about stressful events, be aware of how your own reactions color your responses. Your children will look to you for direction on how to handle their feelings. If you choose to deal with your own distress by ignoring it, they are apt to think that you want them to suppress their feelings. If they sense that you do not want to hear anything negative, the bad feelings will not go away. They will merely go underground, where they do more damage and are less accessible to parents' reassurances. It is far better to let children know that you recognize their feelings and you regard them as normal and understandable.

School-age children who fear enemy soldiers and terrorists often feel ashamed of what they perceive as babyish behavior. They also worry that their newfound fears will never go away. Reduce your children's shame and worry by reassuring them that it is okay to be afraid. Explain that it is not a sign of weakness to feel fear but a natural and protective response to danger. They also need to hear that their fears will not last forever. One of the most effective ways to get this point across is to talk about a temporary fear that you suffered and surmounted when you were a child.

Parents wonder how much of their own uncertainty and anxiety to reveal to children. Children can certainly sense when we are upset. Not only would it be difficult to conceal our own reactions to acts of terrorism and tragedies of war, it would give children the wrong message. We want them to know that when horrible things happen it is normal and healthy to react with strong negative feelings and to freely express these feelings. The best way to teach a healthy approach to difficult feelings is to demonstrate it through our own behavior. This principle is not a license to magnify the crisis for your children and burden them with your own sense of hopelessness and despair.

It is best to strike a balance between two extremes. Parents who take a *business as usual* approach and act as though nothing is out of the ordinary encourage children to distrust their own perceptions. Parents who fall to pieces while discussing the war compound their children's insecurity at a time when they need reassurance. The goal is to show your children how to express strong feelings openly. If you frighten them by appearing out of control, the lesson they retain will not be that it is healthy to express emotions, but that it is frightening.

By maintaining composure while acknowledging the reality of the frightening events, you reassure your children that the events have not shattered the security of their home and family. You show them that they do not have to deny horrible realities, but that even when life is not business as usual, they can rely on their parents to retain their roles as sources of comfort and security. This approach simultaneously demonstrates a very important virtue, particularly during hard times: the importance of exhibiting courage in the face of adversity. It is a lesson that will reap benefits for a lifetime.

When relatives and friends are directly in harms way, or worse have suffered casualties, parents who are so overwhelmed with their own distress should postpone talking with their children about the events until they are able to do so without breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing

fits. Even here, it is essential to acknowledge and validate your children's feelings while providing reassurance. Let them know that you understand it is difficult and worrisome when you are preoccupied with your own distress, but you will recover and will soon be able to give them the attention they need. In fact, helping children cope with traumas will help us recover as well

## Dealing with Children's Questions

Children sometimes ask the same questions repeatedly. Naturally this gets tedious for parents, but you should understand that the questions are not intended to *bug* you. Rather, such questions show that the children have still not fully understood or accepted the answers. Asking the same questions over and over is one way that children try to come to grips with difficult concepts and emotionally intense experiences. Try to be patient. The questions of children are precious gifts. They bestow upon you the awesome responsibility of shaping, or at least framing, your children's attitudes for years to come. Repeated questions deserve repeated answers. When your children no longer need to ask questions, they will stop on their own. If you tell them to stop asking questions, they will not stop thinking about the issues; they will merely exclude you from their inner thoughts.

## Let the Context Determine the Content of What We Say to Children

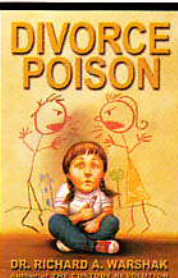
Young children who do not know anyone in the war probably can be shielded from the entire event. Those who have loved ones in the service need reassurance and help to cope.

## T.V. Is Not the Enemy

Although younger children should not be watching too much war coverage, most of them are more interested in Sponge Bob Square Pants anyway. But older children may find war coverage just as fascinating as do their parents. Unless the images become unduly gory, before automatically banning your children from watching the news, find out how the coverage is affecting them.

## Focus on the Positive Lessons of Current Events

Despite the tragedy, war also teaches us about the importance of courage, valor, and loyalty to values, traits that we should all aspire to and help our children develop.



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