



Talking

with

CHILDREN

about



and

WAR

4
Understand
your child's needs

13
Engage
in age-appropriate discussion

16
Learn
together

24
If a family member or
friend is deployed

8
Listen
to your child

20
Be a source of stability
and comfort for your child

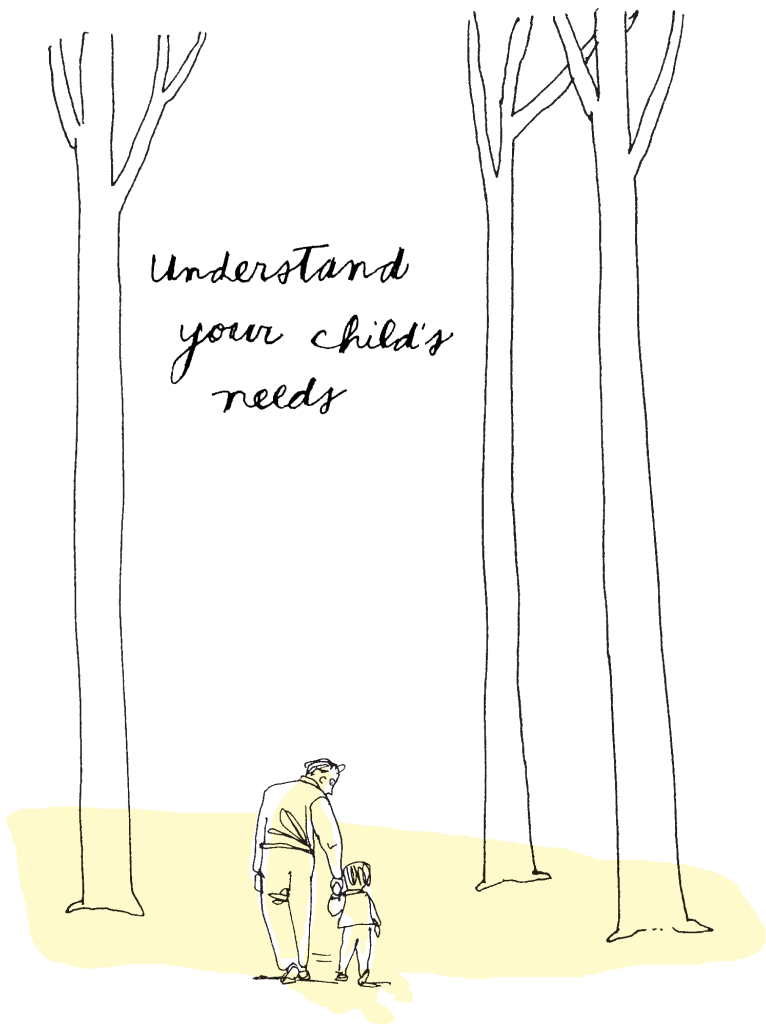
26
Take care
of yourself



THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11 and our government's announcement of a "war on terrorism" have affected all of us in some way. Some of us have been directly affected through the loss of family members or friends. Some of us find our lives changed by the deployment of loved ones in the military. All of us have been affected by the traumatic shocks of the tragedy and new worries about terrorism and what the future may bring. As parents and caring adults, we know that our children have new fears and concerns and we want to know how we can help. We wonder what we can say and do to reassure children and help them understand, in an appropriate way, what is happening in the world.

As a parent—or other important adult in a child's life—you can help by listening carefully to your child's thoughts and concerns, engaging in discussion appropriate to your child's age, learning along with your child, and being a source of stability and comfort.

*Understand
your child's
needs*



WHAT CHILDREN UNDERSTAND AND WORRY ABOUT VARIES WITH AGE, AND DIFFERENT CHILDREN REACT TO DISTURBING NEWS IN VERY DIFFERENT WAYS.

Children under the age of 3 pick up the worries and emotions of the adults around them. They know what it means to be hurt, but the idea of violence is not real to them and they aren't able to understand such concepts as "war" and "death." At this age, children need your comforting presence and the reassurance of predictable routines. They need to know that the adults in their lives will take care of their basic needs for food and comfort. They also need you to protect them from exposure to harsh and shocking media coverage of world events.

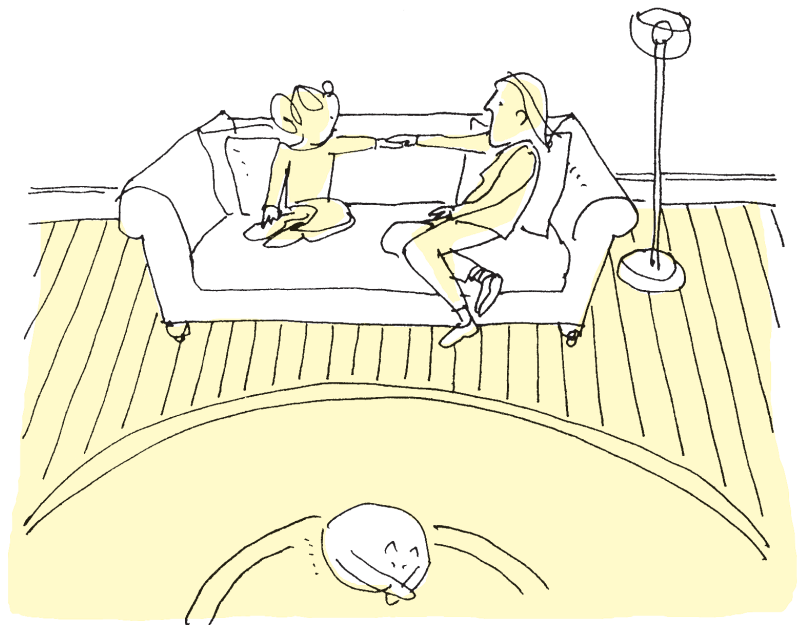
Preschoolers (between the ages of 3 and 5) are more aware of events outside their homes, but generally aren't able to draw a clear line between reality and fantasy. They may be aware of the concept of war, and most will listen to and absorb the adult conversations around them. But their interpretation of what they hear can be surprising. They often deal with their concerns through play—by taking on the role of soldier, pilot, or rescue worker in imaginary play with friends, by playing out those roles with dolls or toy figures, or by expressing themselves in drawing, clay, or

block play. Preschoolers need the reassurance of your presence and the comfort of routines. They may need extra time with you, lots of hugs, more reading aloud at bedtime, and lap time during the day. They need you to be there to answer questions and to listen when they're ready to talk. They also need you to protect them from exposure to news that will make them afraid.

School-age children understand what war is and know that death is forever. But children at this age still engage in hero play with its clear separation of good and bad, right and wrong. The gray areas of life and the tougher moral questions may be out of their reach. As a result, school-age children can react with outrage and absolute opinions when they feel an injustice has been done or a crime committed. They need to see adult examples of patience, flexibility, and an open mind as responses to people with different opinions. School-age children need the adults in their lives to reassure them that they are safe and to spend extra time talking and playing with them when their world feels unsettled. They also need time to talk and play with friends, and will deal with their thoughts and concerns through imaginary play, drawing, and other creative outlets.

Middle school and high school youth deal with trauma and unsettling events in more and more adult ways, but they still need the shelter of a safe and predictable household with clear rules and expectations. In times of crisis, more than ever, they need you to be available when they are ready to talk—though the urge to get closer to their families can create a powerful conflict with their need for greater independence. Don't expect these conversations to be easy, or for a teenager to go directly to you for support and advice. By this age, adolescents understand big concepts and can wrestle with tough moral issues. They still need you to listen, but they may also want your thoughtful and informed perspective on the bigger questions of the day—as long as you're brief and don't take over the conversation. They also need time to talk about these big questions with their peers. They may find it helpful to reach out to others through volunteer programs and community activities. Keep in mind, too, that teenagers may use conversations about controversial and difficult questions to provoke you, deliberately taking a position they know will make you upset. Don't fall into an argument trap as you try to start a helpful conversation.

Listen
to your
child



The first step is to *listen*. As adults, with more experience and knowledge than our children, our inclination often is to *tell* and *explain*. But when confronting issues as powerful as war and violence, it's far better to start by finding out what your child is worried about, what information she has or doesn't have, and how she interprets or understands what she has heard. That way, you'll be able to offer the information, clarification, and reassurance she needs. If you start by telling and explaining what *you* know, you could easily overwhelm your child with new worries and with information she doesn't understand.

Let your child talk first. Ask your child to tell you what she knows about war, and about what is happening in the news. You may be surprised at how much she knows, or you may be alarmed at conclusions she has drawn. Allowing your child to take the lead will help you give her reassurance and the most appropriate information. By making a deliberate effort to listen without interrupting, you may give an older child a chance to say what's really on her mind.

Try to anticipate the questions your child may ask. For a younger child, these may include, “Why are we at war?” “Will the war come here?” “Do we know anyone who will be going to the war?” “Will they be killed?” An older child may want to know why we were attacked, why we are responding the way we are, what kind of response might be justified or effective, and what the risk of future attacks might be. Be open to any question your child may ask, and never dismiss a question as silly or unimportant. Your child’s questions are a window into his thoughts and concerns. By showing that you take his questions seriously, and by responding calmly, you show him that even his wildest fears are not too frightening to deal with.

Ask your child open-ended questions, ones that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” “What are you scared of?” “What bothers you most about the war?” “How does this make you feel?” or, for an older child, “How do you think our country should respond?” “What are the pros and cons of responding that way?” Most young children are not able to draw abstract conclusions about complicated events like war, or to make realistic judgments about what might happen next. For example,

your child may have fears about you going to work or traveling for business. Once you know what his worries are, you can reassure him by explaining that the risks are very small. A thoughtful open-ended question is a good way to get a conversation going with an older child.

Ask clarifying questions. If your preschooler asks, “Is this a real war?” try to find out what she means by saying, “Tell me what you mean by a ‘real war.’” Remember, your child’s idea of a real war may be very different from yours. Always remember to answer your child’s question after she has answered yours.

If your child avoids talking about war, it doesn’t mean he isn’t thinking about it. Try again another time. When children are overwhelmed, they may not be able to express themselves in words. Instead, they may act out their feelings and thoughts in other ways. They may be short-tempered, anxious, have nightmares, or withdraw. Keep in mind that every child is an individual, and that even children the same age may have different ways of processing information and reacting to stress. Pay attention to the way your child deals with his emotions.

And look for other ways of interacting and communicating. This could include playing with toys with your child, or watching a movie or reading a book together. You might offer to take your child to the library to find more information about some aspect of the current conflict, or to find a book that will take his mind off it. With an older child, you might offer to go out to breakfast together, go for a walk, or look for information together in newspapers or reliable sites on the Internet.

*Engage in
age-appropriate
discussion*



TALKING WITH YOUNGER CHILDREN

Remember that young children tend to look for simple answers.

When explaining what is happening in the news, talk at a level your child will understand. Leave out shocking details and summarize the fundamentals of the events. If you're not sure what your child is looking for, ask another question to clarify. After you answer, you might ask, "Is that what you were trying to find out?"

Reassure your child that our government and armed forces are working very hard to end the war and that our government will make every effort to avoid hurting civilians. Explain that the country is not simply trying to get revenge, but is instead trying to prevent further acts of terrorism.

Don't give your child too much information at once. Focus on giving your child small bits of factual information at a time, and let her lead the conversation. Watch for signs that you've satisfied her questions and she is ready to stop talking about it for the time being.

TALKING WITH OLDER CHILDREN

Older children want thoughtful answers and real dialogue. Don't give shallow answers to deep questions. By middle school and high school, teenagers will be forming opinions on challenging moral questions. Take the time to think before you answer. And respect your child's opinion if it's different from your own.

Help your child deal with information overload. Friends, teachers, other adults, and even the media can have a powerful impact on a child's emotional reaction to war. Find out how much information your child is hearing every day. You might say, "Did your teachers talk about war today at school?" "Did your friends talk about it?" "What are you thinking about it?"

Admit that you don't have all the answers. When your child asks a question you can't answer, don't be embarrassed to admit that you don't know. Use it as an opportunity to find the answer together.

*Learn
together*



Listen and learn from your child. A child's simple questions can push you to think about the current conflict in new ways. Conversations with your child can help give perspective on what's really important in your life, and the issues that lie behind day-to-day events.

Teach your child that even the most informed people have different opinions and views. Your child is certain to have friends with different views and opinions about what is happening and what our country should do. Model healthy, open-minded discussion with your own friends and the other adults in your life. Encourage your child to explain the reasons behind his opinions—and do the same yourself—as a way to teach him to think with an open mind.

Educate yourself and your child. Look at an atlas or a map with your child. Learn the location of the countries that are involved in the current conflict or mentioned in the news. Learn about those countries' relationships with each other and our country's relationship with them. Read books on other cultures and religions. Find out about the history that has led up to this conflict and about how our country is viewed in other parts

of the world. Find sources of reliable information on the Internet. Showing your child how to get information about difficult questions is another way to give her a sense of control in a world that can seem frightening and confusing.

Avoid generalizations and stereotypes. Whether you're talking about events in general or answering specific questions, such as "Why are we at war?" use facts, and avoid stereotyping people or countries. In this conflict, it's especially important to teach your child that the small group of people behind the attacks on September 11 don't represent the views of all Muslims in this country or around the world, or all people of Arab descent.

Encourage family discussions. Use the time to talk about your perspectives, and encourage your child to share her thoughts and viewpoints, too. Talk about what makes you most proud of your country, and what makes you least proud.

Talk with your child about ways to help. Your child's school or class may wish to join in a fundraiser or drive for a local charity. Talk to your child about ways others are helping. Encourage your school-age child to write to the President, your Senator, or U.S. Representative about how she feels. Children who can't write can dictate a letter to you and sign their name.

Talk with your child's teacher. Find out how the school or classroom is dealing with the topic of war. And talk about what your child learns in school at home.

Be a source of
stability and comfort
for your child



Offer reassurance and help your child feel secure. When children are exposed to violent or traumatic events—even through the news or other media—they need to hear that “scary” things are not likely to happen to them. Let them know that school and home are safe places to be, and that incidents like the September 11 tragedies are rare.

Maintain normal routines. Prove that life at home is secure by sticking to regular schedules, having family meals together, and going about your business as before.

Make yourself available for extra one-on-one time with your child. Offer the physical and emotional comfort your child needs. A younger child may need more hugs and more time snuggled up with you while you read funny or comforting books. A teenager may just need to know that you’re home and available to talk when he’s ready.

Acknowledge your child’s feelings. Instead of saying, “Don’t feel sad,” you might say, “You seem sad. I feel that way, too.” Reassure your child that what is happening is scary and confusing, and validate your child’s many feelings.

Be a role model. Children pick up clues from adults, especially when they have difficulty handling strong emotions like anger or fear. By remaining composed, you can provide your child with a great sense of security. Make sure that by your own comments or actions at home you serve as a model for your child. Be especially aware of conversations with other adults in cars, on the phone, or in other places where your child may overhear you.

Limit exposure to TV and other media. This is especially important for younger children, for whom the violence in the media can be particularly frightening, but it's good advice for teenagers and adults, too. With an older child, you may want to watch the news together and talk about what you're seeing. Instead of leaving a TV or radio on constantly, have specific "check-in" times. For example, you might make a routine of listening to a radio news program on your way to and from work so your younger children have less exposure to media coverage at home.

Watch for changes in your child's behavior. You child may be more aggressive in school, have trouble going to sleep at night, be more clingy at home, or cry more often. These are all signs that your child is experiencing stress and may need extra reassurance and support from you.

If your child seems to be having trouble coping, seek professional help. Ask your pediatrician, school guidance counselor, or, if you have access to one, your employer's employee assistance program (EAP) for names of counselors who specialize in working with children in your area.



If a family member
or friend is deployed

TALKING ABOUT WAR CAN TAKE ON PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE IF A PARENT, RELATIVE, OR FRIEND IS DEPLOYED.

Let your child know that his parent or relative is not leaving because he, the child, did something wrong. Explain that it is part of a soldier's job, just as other people go to other jobs every day.

Use a map to show your child where his parent is going. Hang the map in his room, with a star on the country or region.

Remind your child of all the times people have gone away and come back again. Explain, if you know, how long his parent is likely to be away and how you'll be able to stay in touch. You might even talk about how to plan for the parent's return.

Consider joining a family support group with other families who have sent members to war. Children can benefit from interacting with other children who are going through similar experiences.

In order for you to take care of your child, you must first take care of yourself. War can be a tremendous stress on you individually and as a family. Talk with friends and family, and seek professional help if you are finding it difficult to cope with your feelings.

take care of
yourself



Design: Philographica, Inc., Brookline, MA

Illustration: Mike McConnell, Wet Inc., Phoenix, MD

Printing: Master Printers of New England, Inc., Wilmington, MA

© 2001 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.

This booklet is made available as a public service by Ceridian's LifeWorks®
employee resource program.

