



Chapter Ten: Understanding the Influence of the Media

I. Lesson Plan

- A. Purpose: Understand the effect of the media on children and youth.
- B. Objectives:
 - 1. Understand the influence of the media on children and youth.
 - 2. Understand how to talk with children about terrorism and war and the images from the media.
- C. Time: 20 minutes
- D. Preparation/Materials Needed:
 - ✪ Easel, Flip chart, markers, Laptop computer, LCD projector, and PowerPoint slides

II. Training Session Content

- A. PowerPoint Slides
 - Slide 10-1: Chapter 10 Introduction Slide
 - Slide 10-2: Today's Media Presence
 - Slide 10-3: How Much News Should Children Watch?
 - Slide 10-4: What They Understand About War and Violence
 - Slide 10-5: Talking to Children/Youth About Terrorism and War
 - Slide 10-6: Adult Opinions and Views
 - Slide 10-7: What Do I Say?
 - Slide 10-8: Media Role Play Activity
- B. Activity and Directions
 - 1. Review slides with participants.
 - 2. Large or small group brainstorm and sharing (depending on time available) of following questions:
 - What forms of media influence our culture in the U.S.?
 - What influence do you think the media have on today's youth?
 - In what ways might children/youth experiencing the deployment of a parent or loved one be impacted by the media?
 - How can we support these youth?

III. Must-Read Background Material

- A. Talking to Children about Terrorism and War
- B. Children and TV Violence
- C. Talking with Kids about Violent Images of War
- D. Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World

IV. Evaluation

- A. Reflection Questions
 - 1. What was something new that you learned about the media and children?
 - 2. How has the media influenced you? As a youth? As an adult?
- B. Application Questions
 - 1. How can you work with youth to help them understand the media?
 - 2. What are some things you can do to help youth understand the media through OMK?

Chapter 10: Understanding the Influence of the Media

Operation: Military Kids
Ready, Set, Go! Training

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-1: Chapter 10 Introduction

Content of this slide adapted from: N/A

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

- Do:**
- Review slide content with participants.
 - Share purpose and objectives of this chapter.

Say: *This chapter of the notebook will help us understand the effect of the media on children and youth. We will look at the influence of the media on children and youth. We will also look at ways to talk with children about terrorism and war and images from the media.*

Today's Media Presence

- Media presence is prevalent in our lives today.
- We have easy, ready access to volumes of information which have potential positive and negative influences.
- Terrorism, conflict, and war occur in front of our eyes each day on television programs and news.
- Extensive media coverage of ongoing military operations creates daily anxiety for children/youth impacted by the deployment of a parent/loved one.

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-2: Today's Media Presence

Content of this slide adapted from: N/A

Materials Needed: Easel, flip chart, markers

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *The media presence is prevalent in our lives today. We have easy, ready access to volumes of information that can be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate. The television as well as the internet bring war and terrorism into our homes. All of this can create additional anxiety for a youth with a deployed loved one.*

Do: • Brainstorm questions as large or small groups.

Say: *What do you think about the media in the world today?
What forms of media influence our culture in the U.S.?*

Say: *What influence do you think the media have on today's youth?*

In what ways might the media impact children/youth experiencing the deployment of a parent or loved one?

How can we support these youth?

How Much News Should Children Watch?

- Depends on age and maturity
- Parent/Caregiver should watch with them
- Talk about what was watched
- Limit exposure to graphic images (especially young children)

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-3: How Much News Should Children Watch?

Content of this slide adapted from: *Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World*, Educators for Social Responsibility, www.esrnational.org

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *How much and what type of news coverage a child watches is dependent on their age and level of maturity. It is suggested that parents/caregivers decide on the appropriateness of shows and topics. Because it is not possible to know exactly what is going to be shown, watch with children so that you are able to discuss the images seen. There is ample research correlating the viewing of violent or tragic events with increased chances of post-traumatic stress symptoms, so it is important to limit the amount of television coverage children watch. It is especially important to limit young children's exposure to graphic images of violence.*

What They Understand About War and Violence

Ages 5–6

- Begin to understand events in context...
- But often one piece at a time
- Intellect not integrated with emotional response

Ages 7 and up

- Think more logically and understand more complex ideas
- Start to look at causes for events
- May see contradictions between war and what they have been told

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-4: What They Understand About War and Violence

Content of this slide adapted from: PBS Parents Guide to... Talking With Kids about War & Violence.

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *Children experience a shift in thinking about current events. They not only have questions about “What is happening in MY world” but also begin to ask “What is happening in THE world.” Children in kindergarten and early elementary school are beginning to understand the events in context, but often just one piece at a time. They cannot always distinguish that events happening elsewhere are not going to affect them directly. This is because their intellectual awareness is not integrated with their emotional response—they still feel scared.*

Say: *As a child gets older they are able to think more logically about world*

events. They are not able to think as abstractly as adults but they are able to understand some complex ideas. They like to examine issues and look for causes for events and ask more challenging questions. Once they are capable of logical thinking they will start to see the contradiction of war and what they have been taught—that it's not good to fight or hurt people.

Talking to Children/Youth About Terrorism and War

- Children/youth ask tough questions and these are the most difficult to answer.
- Age, individual personality, and temperament influence reactions/responses.
- Children/youth also tend to personalize the news they hear.
- It is not always possible to judge if/when they are scared or worried—they may be reluctant to show fears.
- It's important to look for behavioral/emotional clues.

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-5: Talking to Children/Youth About Terrorism and War

Content of this slide adapted from: *Talking To Your Children About War and Terrorism*, by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *Children/youth will ask adults tough questions about war and terrorism. These are the most difficult questions to answer. A child's age, individual personality, and temperament will influence the way they react and their response to war and terrorism. Often youth will personalize the news they hear. This can be especially problematic if a loved one is deployed. It is not always possible to judge whether or not a child is scared or worried, as they may be reluctant to show their fears. Watch for behavioral or emotional clues in the child.*

Adult Opinions and Views

- May burden youth with adult concerns
- May raise new questions and concerns
- May feel need to take care of adult
- May cut off child's expression

Be a good listener—youth need to be heard and understood.

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-6: Adult Opinions and Views

Content of this slide adapted from: *Talking To Your Children About War and Terrorism*, by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *There are several pitfalls to be avoided when an adult shares their feelings about war and terrorism with children. We may burden children with our concerns, raise new questions and fears in the child, or make them feel that they need to care of us. This defeats the purpose of allowing the child or youth to express their feelings and thoughts. It is important that as an adult we actively listen and understand the child or youth's emotions.*

As children grow they may have different opinions about war and terrorism. It is important to teach tolerance and have an understanding of all sides of an issue. Do not let differences of opinion ever spiral to violence.

What Do I Say?

- Use words and concepts your child/youth can understand to explain terrorism/war.
- Give them honest information and answers to questions.
- Be prepared to repeat explanations or have several conversations.
- Acknowledge and support child/youth's thoughts, feelings, and reactions.
- Be consistent, reassuring, and don't make unrealistic promises.
- Avoid stereotyping—teach tolerance and explain prejudice.
- Remember you are a role model and your reactions are being watched closely.

Ready, Set, Go!



Slide 10-7: What do I Say?

Content of this slide adapted from: *Talking To Your Children About War and Terrorism*, by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

Materials Needed: N/A

Trainer Tips: N/A

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Review slide content with participants.

Say: *When talking with children, use words and concepts they can understand to explain terrorism and war. Be sure to give them honest information and answers to their questions. Be prepared to repeat explanations and answers to questions several times. Be supportive of the child or youth and accepting of their feelings, thoughts, and reactions.*

Be consistent, reassuring, and don't make unrealistic promises like "I'm sure your parent will be just fine." It is important to avoid stereotyping, teach tolerance, and explain prejudice. You are a role model and you are being watched closely so don't let your own views cloud the picture for the child.



Slide 10-8: Media Role Play Activity

Content of this slide adapted from: N/A

Materials Needed: None

Trainer Tips: If you can get a video that all age groups would watch, use it to set up the role-play.

What to Do, What to Say:

Do: • Assign each table an age group to focus on for the next activity: Preschool, Elementary, Middle School, or High School.

Say: *At your table, select two people to play youth in the assigned age group. Select two more people to be adults that work with these youth. The rest of the table will be observers.*

We are going to role play what children and youth who have a deployed loved one may ask after they see media that reflects war and violence.

The participants that are role-playing youth should get into the frame of mind of a youth that age.

- Do:**
- Show video clip of images of war. (This could be a news report or something from the Internet. Be sure to preview it so that you are sure it is appropriate for the audience.)

Say: After seeing that video, what kind of questions or concerns would a youth have? At your table, role-play youth responding to seeing that clip. They can ask the adults any questions they want and the adults need to respond. Observers remain quiet during this exercise. You'll have about 5 minutes to do this.

- Do:**
- Walk around the room and listen in to some of the conversations. See if there are recurring themes or good examples of how to respond to youth.
 - Debrief

Say: Times up! What happened during that activity? (Allow time for both "Youth" and "Adults" to respond.) What were the toughest questions for the adults to answer/explain? As youth, what were some good responses that you heard?

Closing: Review some of the basics from Slide 10-7 as a way to talk with children about war and violence.

Talking to Children about Terrorism and War

By *Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.*

How do you talk to your children about their concerns when it comes to terrorism? The following article addresses that and other questions related to this timely topic.

Introduction

Kids ask lots of tough questions but questions about acts of terrorism or war are some of the hardest to answer. Especially when the news provides immediate and graphic details, parents wonder if they should protect their children from the grim reality, explore the topic, or share their personal beliefs. Professionals may wonder how much information to provide or how to help children if they are confused or troubled. And all adults must reconcile the dilemma of advocating non-violence while explaining terrorism and why nations maintain armies and engage in war. This guide helps answer some common questions and concerns parents and professionals have about talking to children about terrorism and war.

How Do Children React to News About War and Terrorism?

Children's age and individual personality influence their reactions to stories they hear and images they see about violent acts in the newspapers and on television. With respect to age, preschool age children may be the most upset by the sights and sounds they see and hear. Children this age confuse facts with their fantasies and fear of danger. They can easily be overwhelmed. They do not yet have the ability to keep things in perspective and may be unable to block out troubling thoughts. School age children can certainly understand the difference between fantasy and reality but may have trouble keeping them separate at certain times. Therefore they may equate a scene from a scary movie with news footage and thus think that the news events are worse than they really are. They also may not realize a single incident is rebroadcast and so may think many more people are involved than is the case. In addition, the graphic and immediate nature of news makes it seem as if the conflict is close to home—perhaps around the corner. Middle school and high school age children may be interested and intrigued by the politics of a situation and feel a need to take a stand or action. They may show a desire to be involved in political or charitable activities related to the violent acts.

In addition to age and maturity, children's personality style and temperament can influence their response. Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful and thus news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. Some children or teens may be more sensitive to, or knowledgeable about, the situation if they are the same nationality of those who are fighting. Children who know someone involved in the area of the acts may be especially affected by events.

Children and teens will also personalize the news they hear, relating it to events or issues in their own lives. Young children are usually most concerned about separation from parents, about good and bad, and fears of punishment. They may ask questions about the children they see on the news who are alone or bring up topics related to their own good and bad behavior. Middle school children are in the midst of peer struggles and are developing a mature moral outlook. Concerns about fairness and punishment will be more prevalent among this age group. Teens consider larger issues related to ethics, politics, and even their own involvement in a potential response through the armed services. Teenagers, like adults, may become reflective about life, re-examining their priorities and interests.

At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore, the suffering they see in the news. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports. Exposure to multiple forms of violence, such as video games, makes it more difficult to believe in, and understand the real human cost of tragedies. Parents and professionals should be on the lookout for children's extreme solutions based on what they have seen in movies. A macho or impulsive response is ill advised and should be put into the context of the real conflict.

How Can I Tell What A Child Is Thinking or Feeling About the Terrorist Act or War?

It is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about news they hear. Children may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not be aware of how they are being affected by the news. Parents can look for clues as to how their child is reacting. War play is not necessarily an indication of a problem. It is normal for children to play games related to war and this may increase in response to current events as they actively work with the information, imitate, act out, or problem solve different scenarios. Regressive behaviors (when children engage in behaviors expected of a younger age child), overly aggressive or withdrawn behaviors, nightmares, or an obsession about violence may indicate extreme reactions needing closer attention.

Addressing a child's particular, personal fears is also necessary. Parents should not make assumptions about what worries their child. Parents are often surprised by a child's concerns, e.g., worrying about being shot while at Sunday school, or refusing to go on a boat ride after seeing a ship get attacked.

How Should I Talk To Children About A Terrorist Act or War?

Contrary to parents' fears, talking about violent acts will not increase a child's fear. Having children keep scared feelings to themselves is more damaging than open discussion. As with other topics, consider the age and level of understanding of the child when entering into a discussion. Even children as young as four or five know about violent acts but all children may not know how to talk about their concerns. It is often necessary for parents to initiate the dialogue themselves. Asking children what they have heard or think is a good way to start. Parents should refrain from lecturing or teaching about the issues until there has been some exploration about what is most important, confusing, or troublesome to the child. Adults should look for opportunities as they arise, for example when watching the news together. You can also look for occasions to bring up the topic when relevant related topics arise—for example, when people in a television show are arguing. Discussion about larger issues such as tolerance, difference, and non-violent problem solving can also be stimulated by news. Learning about a foreign culture or region also dispels myths and more accurately points out similarities and differences.

Far off violent events can stimulate a discussion of non-violent problem solving for problems closer to home. For instance, helping children negotiate how to share toys or take turns in the baseball lineup demonstrates productive strategies for managing differences. Older children may understand the issues when related to a community arguing over a proposed shopping mall. Effective ways of working out these more personal situations can assist in explaining and examining the remote violent situations.

Adults should also respect a child's wish not to talk about particular issues until ready. Attending to nonverbal reactions, such as facial expression or posture, play behavior, verbal tone, or content of a child's expression can offer important clues to a child's reactions and unspoken need to talk.

Answering questions and addressing fears does not necessarily happen all at once in one sit down session or one history lesson plan. New issues may arise or become apparent over time and thus discussion about war should be done on an ongoing and as needed basis.

Should I Let A Child Watch Television or Read About Terrorism or War?

Terrorism and war provide a perfect opportunity to discuss the issues of prejudice, stereotyping, and aggression, and nonviolent ways to handle situations. Unfortunately, it is easy to look for and assign blame, in part to make a situation understandable and feel it was preventable. Adults must monitor their own communications, being careful to avoid making generalizations about groups of individuals. This dehumanizes the situation. Open, honest discussion is recommended. But adults must be mindful of stating their opinions as fact or absolutes. Discussions should allow for disagreement and airing of differ-

ent points of view. Feeling their opinion is wrong or misunderstood can cause children to disengage from dialogue or make them feel they are bad or stupid. In discussing how war or terrorism often stems from interpersonal conflict, misunderstanding, or differences in religion or culture, it is important to model tolerance. Accepting and understanding others' opinions is a necessary step in nonviolent conflict resolution.

Distinguishing between patriotism and opinion can be helpful. One can disagree with a cause or action but still believe in the right to have arms or feel it is important to defend a country. The manner in which issues are resolved is separate from one's allegiance or personal beliefs.

How Can I Reassure A Child?

Don't dismiss a child's fears. Children can feel embarrassed or criticized when their fears are minimized. Exploring the issues and positive ways of coping help children master their fear and anxiety. Parents and professionals can reassure children with facts about how people are protected (for example, by policemen in the community or the President who meets with world leaders) and individual safety measures that can be taken (for example, reinforcing the importance of talking to an adult when bullied). Avoiding "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information is best. Maintaining routines and structure is also reassuring to children and helps normalize an event and restore a sense of safety.

What Should I Do If We Know Someone in the Conflict or Terrorism?

Having a personal relationship with someone in the area of conflict or target of terrorism can cause additional particularly troubling feelings. When a friend or relative is involved in a traumatic newsworthy event, others often search for information. It is advisable to find the most reliable information source and filter out both the quantity and quality of the potentially inaccurate news provided to the general public. Having accurate information informs one of the best way to communicate with the person and the possibility of sending aid. Taking things one step at a time, being realistic about what is known rather than preparing for the worst, can be difficult but helpful. Imagining the worst does not prevent it from happening and can turn an unpredictable situation into an unnecessarily bleak one. Obtaining support from others in a similar situation by sharing information or feelings helps some people feel less alone and validates their distressing feelings. Adults can share their fears but must manage their own distraught reactions so as not to scare their children or students. Engaging in some normal activities of life, like eating, sleeping, school, and work, provides stability and predictability at a time when events make life seem confusing.

Listen to Children:

1. Create a time and place for children to ask their questions. Don't force children to talk about things until they're ready.

2. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in a city or state associated with incidents or events.
3. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems directly or indirectly related to current events.

Answer Children's Questions:

1. Use words and concepts your child can understand. Make your explanation appropriate to your child's age and level of understanding. Don't overload a child with too much information.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know if you're not being honest.
3. Be prepared to repeat explanations or have several conversations. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may be your child's way of asking for reassurance.
4. Acknowledge and support your child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let your child know that you think their questions and concerns are important.
5. Be consistent and reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises.
6. Avoid stereotyping groups of people by race, nationality, or religion. Use the opportunity to teach tolerance and explain prejudice.
7. Remember that children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They are very interested in how you respond to events. They learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
8. Let children know how you are feeling. It's OK for them to know if you are anxious or worried about events. However, don't burden them with your concerns.
9. Don't confront your child's way of handling events. If a child feels reassured by saying that things are happening "very far away," it's usually best not to disagree. The child may need to think about events this way to feel safe.

Provide Support:

1. Don't let children watch lots of violent or upsetting images on TV. Repetitive frightening images or scenes can be very disturbing, especially to young children.
2. Help children establish a predictable routine and schedule. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays, and group activities take on added importance during stressful times.

3. Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about activities and discussions at school. Teachers should know about the child's specific fears or concerns.
4. Children who have experienced trauma or losses may show more intense reactions to tragedies or news of war or terrorist incidents. These children may need extra support and attention.
5. Watch for physical symptoms related to stress. Many children show anxiety and stress through complaints of physical aches and pains.
6. Watch for possible preoccupation with violent movies or war theme video/computer games.
7. Children who seem preoccupied or very stressed about war, fighting, or terrorism should be evaluated by a qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need professional help include: ongoing trouble sleeping, persistent upsetting thoughts, fearful images, intense fears about death, and trouble leaving their parents or going to school. The child's physician can assist with appropriate referrals.
8. Help children communicate with others and express themselves at home. Some children may want to write letters to the President, Governor, local newspaper, or to grieving families.
9. Let children be children. They may not want to think or talk a lot about these events. It is OK if they'd rather play ball, climb trees, or ride their bike, etc.

War and terrorism are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel confused, upset, and anxious. Parents, teachers, and caring adults can help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent, and supportive manner. Most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they can and do get through difficult times and go on with their lives. By creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, parents can help them cope and reduce the possibility of emotional difficulties.

Children and TV Violence

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology
Nov. 2002; http://www.aacap.org/cs/roots/facts_for_families/children_and_tv_violence

American children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily. Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Unfortunately, much of today's television programming is violent. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may:

- Become "immune" to the horror of violence
- Gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems
- Imitate the violence they observe on television
- Identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers

Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Sometimes, watching a single violent program can increase aggressiveness. Children who view shows in which violence is very realistic, frequently repeated, or unpunished, are more likely to imitate what they see. Children with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence. The impact of TV violence may be immediately evident in the child's behavior or may surface years later, and young people can even be affected when the family atmosphere shows no tendency toward violence.

While TV violence is not the only cause of aggressive or violent behavior, it is clearly a significant factor.

Parents can protect children from excessive TV violence in the following ways:

- Pay attention to the programs their children are watching and watch some with them
- Set limits on the amount of time they spend with the television; consider removing the TV set from the child's bedroom
- Point out that although the actor has not actually been hurt or killed, such violence in real life results in pain or death
- Refuse to let the children see shows known to be violent, and change the channel or turn off the TV set when offensive material comes on, with an explanation of what is wrong with the program
- Disapprove of the violent episodes in front of the children, stressing the belief that such behavior is not the best way to resolve a problem
- To offset peer pressure among friends and classmates, contact other parents and agree to enforce similar rules about the length of time and type of program the children may watch

Parents can also use these measures to prevent harmful effects from television in other areas such as racial or sexual stereotyping. The amount of time children watch TV, regardless of content, should be moderated because it decreases time spent on more beneficial activities such as reading, playing with friends, and developing hobbies. If parents have serious difficulties setting limits, or have ongoing concerns about how their child is reacting to television, they should contact a child and adolescent psychiatrist for consultation and assistance.

Children and the News

Children often see or hear the news many times a day through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Seeing and hearing about local and world events, such as natural disasters, catastrophic events, and crime reports, may cause children to experience stress, anxiety, and fears.

There have also been several changes in how news is reported that have given rise to the increased potential for children to experience negative effects. These changes include the following:

- Television channels and Internet services and sites which report the news 24 hours a day
- Television channels broadcasting live events as they are unfolding, in “real time”
- Increased reporting of the details of the private lives of public figures and role models
- Pressure to get news to the public as part of the competitive nature of the entertainment industry
- Detailed and repetitive visual coverage of natural disasters and violent acts

While there has been great public debate about providing television ratings to warn parents about violence and sex in regular programming, news shows have only recently been added to these discussions. Research has shown that children and adolescents are prone to imitate what they see and hear in the news, a kind of contagion effect described as “copy cat” events. Chronic and persistent exposure to such violence can lead to fear, desensitization (numbing), and in some children an increase in aggressive and violent behaviors. Studies also show that media broadcasts do not always choose to show things that accurately reflect local or national trends.

For example, statistics report a decrease in the incidence of crime, yet, the reporting of crime in the news has increased 240 percent. Local news shows often lead with or break into programming to announce crime reports and devote as much as 30 percent of the broadcast time to detailed crime reporting.

The possible negative effects of news can be lessened by parents, teachers, or other adults by watching the news with the child and talking about what has been seen or heard. The child's age, maturity, developmental level, life experiences, and vulnerabilities should guide how much and what kind of news the child watches.

Guidelines for Minimizing the Negative Effects of Watching the News Include:

- Monitor the amount of time your child watches news shows
- Make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to the child
- Watch the news with your child
- Ask the child what he/she has heard and what questions he/she may have
- Provide reassurance regarding his/her own safety in simple words emphasizing that you are going to be there to keep him/her safe
- Look for signs that the news may have triggered fears or anxieties such as sleeplessness, fears, bedwetting, crying, or talking about being afraid

Parents should remember that it is important to talk to the child or adolescent about what he/she has seen or heard. This allows parents to lessen the potential negative effects of the news and to discuss their own ideas and values. While children cannot be completely protected from outside events, parents can help them feel safe and help them to better understand the world around them.

Talking With Kids About Violent Images of War

By *Anita Gurian*, Ph.D

http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles/images_war.html

Photographs showing Iraqi prisoners of war being subjected to abuse by American military police have recently been released and shown repeatedly by most American television stations. The photographs contain graphic details and parents wonder if, when, and how to explain these events to their children. Kids' questions are likely to be tough to answer, but as with all important discussions, keeping communication lines open is critical and honesty is essential. Some concerns don't get settled quickly, and more than one talk may be necessary.

Following are some guidelines:

- Wait for the child's questions or for an opportune moment to bring up the topic. Be aware of your own reactions—shock, dismay, anger—since children are apt to reflect the attitudes of their parents.
- Consider the child's individual personality style and temperament. Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful and may already be worried about the war, especially if they know someone directly involved in the war. News showing graphic instances of sexual and physical violence may heighten a child's feelings of anxiety. Some children, preoccupied with their own lives, will simply not pay much attention to the news. At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore, the violence and suffering depicted. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports. Exposure to other forms of violence, such as video games, makes it more difficult to understand the reality of the news events.
- Adjust your response to the age of the child. Children personalize the news and interpret events in relation to their own lives. Young children are usually concerned about good or bad and fear punishment. They may confuse facts with their fantasies and fears. They may not realize that the same images are shown many times and may think the actions are repeated. School-age children, in the midst of peer struggles, are concerned about fairness and punishment. They may equate scenes from a scary movie with news footage and magnify the personal effect of news events. Teens consider issues of ethics and politics and may feel a need to take a stand or action.

Following are common questions reflecting parents' concerns and some possible answers:

Can we just ignore the news and hope the children don't see shocking and violent images?

Although it's tempting to protect children from unpleasant realities, ignoring the news, particularly for school-age children, is probably not an option. They are likely to see the images in the media or hear about them from others. Letting kids keep scared feelings to themselves can be more damaging than frank discussion.

How do we explain abusive and shocking acts?

First find out what the child saw, read, or heard and then encourage questions. Answer questions directly without giving more information than the child is asking for. Answers might include points such as the following, depending on the age and personality of the child:

- What we know so far is that some prison guards and others have broken laws.
- These laws have been agreed upon by countries all over the world.
- Our government and army courts are investigating these acts.
- People involved in cruel acts will be brought to trial.
- Punishment for people found guilty will be decided by courts.
- Most people in all countries, including the Americans and the Iraqis, obey the rules and laws of their country.

With older children the discussion might include reasons why rules, even in war, are necessary. Discussion should emphasize that individual acts of violence do not reflect the values of the whole society. It would be helpful to point out examples of individual bravery that have been in the news.

How much information should we share?

For children who want more information, parents can talk about the role of the International Red Cross, the specific rules for the rights of prisoners of war established by the Geneva Convention, and the fact that war criminals are prosecuted in the World Court. Older children may wish to discuss the reasons for the war, the way their lives have been affected, and ways in which they can express their opinion.

Should I let my children watch television?

Research has shown that watching media coverage, especially repeated viewing, can create stress for children even when they are not directly exposed to tragedy. Television viewing should be limited. Parents should watch with their children in order to deal with their reactions and to be available to share their feelings.

Should we tell our child our opinion?

Open and honest discussion is recommended. Serious and shocking events may stimulate a dialogue about the larger issues of terrorism, tolerance, and nonviolent problem solving.

How can we help children deal with their worry and shock?

Continue with established routines. When appropriate, talk about things children might do, such as writing letters to make their opinions known and participating in community or political organizations. Parents should seek further help if they see:

- Acting out behavior
- A change or problems with behavior, such as eating or sleeping or withdrawn or depressed behavior that does not resolve
- Excessive or uncontrollable worry
- Regression to earlier behavior, such as bedwetting or baby talk
- Avoidance of school and social contacts
- Avoidance of anything that reminds them of the war
- Frequent new, unusual, or unexplained physical complaints