

Talking to Children About Armed Conflict

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Whenever stories about armed conflict, terrorism or the possibility of war appear on television or in the news, considering the possible reactions of children and youth is important. Such topics quickly become a focus for daily discussions among people. Thinking of children's reactions is especially important when the issues directly relate to their family life, such as the deployment of a parent for military service.

Children may not understand the political or military issues underlying such events, but seeing other children on the news often captures their attention. After watching military families say goodbye on the national news, for example, children in general may wonder if their parents will have to leave, too.

Children who have one or both parents in the military may be faced with issues of separation and uncertainty. A child may have a teacher or sports coach who gets deployed for military duty. Older children might struggle with the different opinions concerning issues involving armed conflict or war. They may have questions concerning what should be done on a national or even global level.

Talking to children about war and armed conflict as a parent or caregiver allows you to assist children in understanding the issues and dealing with their concerns and feelings.

Recommendations for Parents in General

- **Most importantly, listen and talk to your children.** Parents must be prepared to listen. Let your children know this is a topic they can talk about with you. Ask open-ended questions so your children can direct the conversation and you can get a feeling for their thoughts and concerns. This can allow you to clarify some confusion or comfort any worries. For example, you might

ask, "What have you seen on TV?" or "How do you feel about your friend's parent being overseas?" Also, remember this is simply the beginning and many more discussions likely will follow as events unfold.

- **Use stories and art work to enhance conversations about these difficult topics.** Many children are able to express themselves through drawings or comparisons with characters in a story. Talking about someone else instead of their own feelings often is easier and less threatening to children.
- **Avoid talking about enemies.** Talking about "bad or harmful actions" might be more helpful than "bad or evil people." Using this approach can help children understand that people can choose their behavior. Therefore, if a person has done something "bad" in the past, they can choose to do something "good" in the present or future. This helps children avoid broad stereotypes about those involved in armed conflict or war.
- **Reassure your children of their safety.** Explain what you as a parent and others will do to keep children safe. Explain how far away the military action probably will be (use a map for illustration). However, do not ignore the related terror and terrible things that will happen in a war. Studies indicate children care about people in their own country, as well as other countries. Support this caring attitude.

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Assistance to Children with a Deployed Family Member

Potential or actual armed conflict often results in the deployment of adults for military preparation or active duty, which means also dealing with issues regarding separation. Here are a few reminders:

- **Help children realize that worrying about a loved one who is deployed is natural.** Validate feelings of anxiety or concern that children may express, while also encouraging practical coping strategies to deal with worries.
- **Adapt your conversation to the child's level of understanding.** For a very young child, explaining military deployment can be very difficult, while older kids will understand and want to talk about time of separation or danger concerns. Be willing to engage children at the level of conversation they need.
- **Find ways to help children communicate with a deployed family member.** Take some pictures and send them with a note from the child. Tape record a message or "day in the life" of the child and send it to the parent. Assist a child to communicate through e-mail or other technologies.
- **Volunteer to help with the little things.** You may offer to help children with homework, transport them to a youth activity or have the family come for dinner. Being a good neighbor becomes especially important when parents or relatives are deployed on military assignment.
- **Provide extra support to the family in managing life challenges, such as preparing taxes or planning for holidays.** Additional stress occurs when a family must run a household without one or more adults who might be deployed on military assignment. Think about challenging or busy times of the year and offer some assistance.

Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Young Children

- Separation concerns or fears (from parents, etc.), especially when deployment or training occurs
- Clinging to people or a favorite toy or blanket
- Tantrums or irritability
- Questioning or misunderstanding of what is happening with armed conflict
- Withdrawal or restlessness (quieter, isolation, change in normal routines)
- Regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, clinging to adults, bed wetting, etc.)
- Sleep or physical problems (disturbance of sleep, nightmares, stomach problems or other symptoms of physical distress)

What to Say and Do

- Provide many physical reminders of the love or presence of family members involved in armed conflict. Such things might include a special picture, piece of jewelry from the person, personalized T-shirt, tape of the person's voice or other mementoes.
- Allow repetitive questions and a search for understanding. Give honest and clear answers. Provide verbal reassurance.
- Help children express feelings through play, drawing or telling a story. Ask them about a story or picture related to events and what it means to them.
- Monitor adult conversations around children. Avoid talking about enemies or violence, as this can upset young children.
- Be aware of a child's thoughts about people or events. Young children may express strong opinions or imagine themselves in a powerful or heroic role to protect a loved one in armed conflict. Help them express feelings and offer support.

Talking to Adolescents (ages 9 to 13)

When talking to adolescent children from ages 9 to 13, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Adolescents

- Fears and anxiety for themselves or a parent who is on military duty
- Anger or aggression toward siblings or peers, or toward parents preoccupied by dealing with stress
- Increased irritability
- Symptoms of physical distress (disturbance of sleep, stomach problems, etc.)
- Lack of attentiveness or changed behavior in school

What to Say and Do

- Show children an example of self-control and positive coping. An example of maturity and caring will help children as they respond and think about events. Acknowledge their concerns and encourage caring for others.
- Monitor exposure to media coverage of armed conflict. Reduce exposure to television or radio coverage, and talk with children about what they see and feel.
- Involve children in creative expression of their thoughts and feelings through art, drama or storytelling. Together with your children, read books or watch movies that involve dealing with challenges of conflict. Ask children what they think about characters and how they respond.
- Children this age can write letters, participate in class projects that support military families, or prepare and send care packages. Allow children to participate in opportunities such as attending a memorial service, making a donation, providing service or other appropriate activities.

Talking to Teens (ages 14 to 18)

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18, consider the following:

Common Reactions of Teens

- Discouragement or pessimism about life, people or the future
- Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, emotional distance and isolation
- Thoughts about the future, concern about well-being of themselves and others
- Loss of interest in usual hobbies, activities or friends

What to Say and Do

- Encourage positive hopes for the future. Communicate that no one knows what the future holds, but working together brings greater potential for a positive future and peace in our lives.
- Discuss issues of conflict and differences with teens. Assess how they feel about events and people associated with conflict or violence. Encourage reflective thinking, avoidance of stereotypes and recognition that people do have power to choose their acts toward others. Help them understand that conflict results from the inability to live with differences.
- Establish and maintain consistent routines that involve teens and provide them with security and familiarity. This might include regular meals together, bedtime routines or playing family games.
- Provide the opportunity for teens to learn from veterans, military personnel, international citizens, historians or policymakers about their experiences and insights regarding armed conflict and peace. Provide support as teens develop their understanding of such issues.
- Slow down and help teens appreciate the positive things in life. Armed conflict often alters normalcy for families or communities, and teens must remember the importance of kindness, caring and respect for others.

Recommendations for Military Families

For military families, a few practical reminders can help in talking with and guiding children during times of armed conflict.

- **Try to keep your children's schedule as normal as possible if one of your family members is deployed.** This will be hard at times because a spouse or other family member probably was involved in many activities, such as watching kids or driving them to appointments. However, keeping family routines consistent reinforces a child's sense of security.
- **Use discussion and honesty to help your children face their concerns and deal with questions.** Gentle honesty and support generally are best for children when discussing concerns related to armed conflict. A teenager, for example, may get upset that some are protesting a country's position on war. Let children express what they feel while guiding them to consider the differing views others may hold.
- **Monitor the amount of TV news you watch.** You know best how you and your children react to the news, especially when outcomes and topics discussed are uncertain and worrisome. If you feel your anxiety level rising too high, your children likely will have increased fear or anxiety as well. Limit the amount of news coverage your children see, as coverage of armed conflict tends to dwell primarily on violence and fear. Turn off the TV and radio as needed and rely instead on information distributed through the military chain of command.
- **Develop and use your support network.** Before or after a deployment occurs, be sure to develop a support network that includes family, friends, neighbors and all the resources the military can offer. These relationships will allow you to ask for help when you need it. Talking with others who are experiencing a similar situation can be especially helpful. This can lower your stress level, which in turn helps you be a better parent.
- **Take advantage of opportunities to support children and their involvement in caring for others affected by armed conflict.** When a family is affected by armed conflict, children often are more sensitive to potential impacts on others. Assist children to participate in opportunities to provide support to others, such as through gathering supplies for families in need, sending materials to children affected by war or otherwise giving assistance.

Community Support During Armed Conflict

Armed conflict affects not only individuals and their families, but entire communities.

A child may learn a fellow player on his or her soccer team has a parent who is deployed. A teenager may go to school and discover a favorite teacher has been given orders for military deployment. An entire community may mourn the loss of a man or woman who has been killed in armed conflict overseas. These realities of armed conflict highlight the need for communities to support children and their families during such times. Available sources of support in local communities can be valuable in meeting needs and providing resources for those affected by armed conflict.

The following page is a list of resources.

Recommended Resources for Adults and Children

- **PBS Parents Web Site – “Talking with Kids About War and Violence”** – Web site link can be accessed at: www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/war/
- **American Psychological Association Help Center – Featured Topics, “Resilience in a Time of War”** – Web site link can be accessed at: www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/
- **National Association of School Psychologists, Crisis Resources – War/Terrorism Materials** – Web site link can be accessed at: www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html#war
- **National Institute of Mental Health – “Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters”** – Web site link can be accessed at: www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm
- **NYU Child Study Center – Public Mental Health** – Web site link can be accessed at: www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/articles_public.html

Recommended Resources for Military Families

Department of Defense – Military HomeFront Initiative

The Department of Defense has established a Military HomeFront initiative that contains information for military parents and individuals who work with military families at www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil

The site is easy to navigate and provides much information for parents and families. Click under “Service Providers” for more specific

links to family areas, for both younger and older children. Additional resources are available in your own communities. Please use these resources wisely so support resources are not overwhelmed.

American Legion – Family Support Network: (800) 504-4098

Military Family Support Line, North Dakota: (800) 242-4940, or in Bismarck, (701) 333-2058. This is the Family Program Joint Force Headquarters, staffed by a state family program director.

Family Support Centers – Air Force

- Grand Forks (701) 747-3241
- Minot (701) 723-3950

Family Assistance Centers – National Guard

- Bismarck (HQ) (800) 242-4940
- Fargo (701) 451-6090
- Minot (701) 420-5861
- Bismarck (701) 333-3350
- Grand Forks (701) 792-4568

Family Program Office for Air National Guard, Fargo – (701) 451-2112

Military OneSource – (800) 342-9647 or www.militaryonesource.com

Regional Human Service Centers

- Bismarck (701) 328-8888
- Devils Lake (701) 665-2200
- Dickinson (701) 227-7500
- Fargo (701) 298-4500
- Grand Forks (701) 795-3000
- Jamestown (701) 253-6300
- Minot (701) 857-8500
- Williston (701) 774-4600

Participate in family support group meetings and use the support system available through the military if possible. If you have more serious concerns, seek help through counseling resources based on the installation, in the community or in the private sector.

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