

How to Talk with Children about War (or other concerns)

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You know your own child best. But here are a few suggestions on talking with children about their concerns.

- Often children are hesitant to share their fears or questions with adults. You need to **create an opening** for the child to talk. You can use a question like “What have you heard about the war?” or “How do you feel about what has happened?”
- Then **the key is to LISTEN**. Avoid giving them a lecture on your views. To begin with, avoid even correcting their misinformation. Instead, listen to the feelings behind the child’s words, and respond to those feelings: “Sounds like you’re worried” or “This is a bit scary, isn’t it.”
- Avoid belittling a child’s concerns, no matter how illogical or silly they may seem. Try to accept and **validate the child’s feelings** (“A lot of people feel that way.”) Help the child clarify how he/she feels. “That’s interesting, can you tell me more about that?” “What exactly do you mean by that?”
- **Avoid burdening a young child with your own feelings**. But some sharing of your feelings can be reassuring to an adolescent (“You seem [sad, angry, worried, etc.] about this, and I find myself feeling that way too”). Just be sure that *your* feelings and needs don’t become the center of attention.
- After you are well into the conversation, and know what the child thinks and feels, then you can **provide any needed information**, or correct misinformation. “By the way, Iraq doesn’t have any planes or missiles that can bomb us.”
- With young children, sometimes the most important thing you can say is simply to **reassure your child** that you won’t let anything bad happen to them or your family. They want reassurance, and you can give it to them. You can also use more than words: hold and hug your child.
- With older children and adolescents: You are a lucky parent if your child asks one of the tough questions, like “Why do people do this?” or “Why must we still have wars?” **You now have an opportunity** to help your child think about values. We recommend you avoid the simplistic answers that shut off thinking and lead to greater hatred or prejudice against whole groups of people (a simplistic answer might be “Because we are good and they are bad.”) Instead, try to acknowledge the different points of view that well-meaning people have, how people can have such different viewpoints, and our options for settling differences.

(These suggestions are drawn, in part, from an excellent web site maintained by Educators for Social Responsibility: www.esrnational.org/guide.htm)