

Talking with Children about War:  
***Age differences in children's understanding of  
the war on TV.***

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**For preschool aged children** (0 – 5) “seeing is believing,” and fantasy can seem real. For example, preschoolers believe that dreams are real, and can sometimes be frightened by a picture of a bee in a children’s picture book, really believing the bee might sting. They will be affected most by vivid images and startling, emotional sounds (for example, by pictures of children crying as their parents leave for war, or picture and sound of injured people). Think about it this way: whatever they see on TV, they may believe is happening right now in their world. When the video of the jet crashing into the Twin Trade Towers was replayed over and over again, many young children believed it was happening over and over again (which *would* be very frightening).

**School aged children** (6-12) can understand that events are real but taking place elsewhere. But they often relate the events to their own lives. They may want to know if any children were hurt, or if any children lost their parents. They are unlikely to understand the adult political issues (who is at war and why), but will be most concerned with their own family’s continuing safety.

**Teenagers** can be frightened by many of the same things as younger children, but may also have two new kinds of concerns. First, they may be more worried about the future (not just the present) safety of themselves and their families. Second, they may have serious concerns about the larger meaning of the conflict. For example, they may ask Why can’t governments settle their differences without wars? Why do people in another country threaten us?

**ALL CHILDREN** will look to their parents to know how to respond to televised images of the war. If you become frightened or depressed, so will your children. If you avoid becoming obsessed with the news, and if you show courage in the face of hard news, then your child will learn this too.

**ALL CHILDREN** (and all adults too) will be less frightened if they see less TV. Many research studies have shown this. One study following the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma found that children who watched lots of TV coverage of the bombing were far more likely to develop a “stress disorder.” Even in normal times, the more TV an adult watches, the more they over-estimate how dangerous their community is. This is because TV over-emphasizes crime and violence.

(Some of this information is from a good book by University of Wisconsin Professor Joanne Cantor: *“Mommy I’m Scared”*: *How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them.*)

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](http://www.esrnational.org/guide.htm) )