

Talking with Children about War:
***8 Things You Can Do to Reduce
Children's Fears about War.***

Dr. Dave Riley
University of Wisconsin-Madison / Extension

1. **Turn off the TV news.** Really, we aren't kidding. This is probably the easiest and most effective thing you can do.
2. **Maintain your routines.** Routines are reassuring for all of us, but especially for younger children. So keep the bedtime routine, don't give up on soccer practice, have dinner at the usual time.
3. **Focus on your relationships.** Nurture your child more: Hold and cuddle more. Spend more time together and really give them your attention and warmth. With preschoolers, make sure you aren't late to pick them up (in stressful times they will fear separation more).
4. **Model a calm emotional response to events.** Children 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.
5. **Encourage communication.** (See other handout.) Create openings for your child to talk about his/her understandings and feelings. Listen and validate their feelings. Help them clarify exactly what they know and feel.
6. **Allow young children to gain understanding through play.** In the same way that young children count on their fingers because they can't count mentally, they may try to understand social conflicts like war through their actions –through play– rather than mentally. So don't be surprised if they play act scenes of war they have viewed on TV. But instead of letting them re-enact the same scene over and over, we suggest you help them expand the play. "Can we set up a hospital to fix the wounded soldiers?" "Let's make a place for the enemy soldiers who give up their guns. Where can they sleep? What shall we feed them?"
7. **Find meaning through action.** By acting on our beliefs, we can avoid a feeling of lack of control in our lives. Adolescents in particular may have beliefs that need matching actions. Think of age-appropriate activities related to war and peace. One teenager may want to correspond by email with our troops in Iraq. Another may want to see what relief agencies are doing, and how we might help.
8. **Teach the right way to do things,** rather than just saying "don't." If your child makes a threatening statement about other people, instead of just saying "Don't say that," you could talk about good and appropriate ways to channel your anger into action. Instead of saying "Stop staring at the TV," you could say "Let's write a letter to the editor." Saying "don't" doesn't teach.