



Talking to your children about war

By Becky D'Angelo-Veitch, Children's Ministry Coordinator

As the prospect of our nation going to war becomes more likely, parents and other caregivers are no doubt beginning to think about how to best talk with their children about war. While each individual has different thoughts, feelings, opinions and worries, there are a few guidelines that can help parents navigate this difficult time.

Remain calm and maintain routines. This is particularly important with younger children. In a time of great uncertainty, one gift that we can give our children is to try and keep family routines as normal as possible. While parents may feel very worried or stressed over the world situation, it is imperative that they do everything that they can to keep their children's lives stable.

*"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." ~Isaiah 41:10*

Talk about what is going on. When having a conversation with your children about war, always first ask them what they know. This prevents parents from planting fears in children's minds and helps parents to respond to children's concerns more directly. Let your child take the lead. Some children may not want to talk about it at all, but be sure to let them know that you are there if they have questions or are worried. When talking about your own personal views, be sure to present them as one option, not fact. Remember that listening to differing opinions and accepting them is one of the cornerstones of non-violent conflict resolution.

Reassure children. No, we do not know what the outcome of the war will be. One thing that we can assure children about is that they will be safe. Children can be assured that the war is taking place thousands of miles away. They will be safe, and parents and other caregivers will be with them and will care for them. That said, do not dismiss a child's fears. When a child expressed fear, listen to them and try to give them information to alleviate that fear.

*"As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" ~Psalm 103:13, Isaiah 66:13*

Limit media exposure. Violent images bring the war into our homes. Often, especially with very young children, there is little understanding that the war is far away. Children are also confused and disturbed when they see the same image repeatedly. If you do watch the news, always watch it with your child and debrief what you have seen.

Look for opportunities to take action. Emphasize all of the wonderful things that are happening in the world. People are coming together to provide aid for those less fortunate than us, communities are working together to support service people. Get involved in positive actions as a family. If you know of members of the military, send cards and letters. Write letters to congress people and the president. Pray! Pray for service people, pray for peace, pray for the people of Iraq, but always pray to remind our children that God hears our prayers.

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies." ~2 Corinthians 4:8-10

"Are there any among you suffering? They should pray" ~James 5:13a

It is inevitable that you will get the question, “Why would God let a war happen” from children. God is with us always. When we are happy, God is with us. When we are sad, God is with us. God does not, however, make decisions for the world, even when people think that there is something evil that God should fix for us. God is with us every step of the way giving us strength to make the right decisions ourselves.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” ~Romans 8:38-39

Sources:

- “Talking with Kids about War and Terrorism” Maria White (University of Michigan Web site)*
- “Talking to Kids About Terrorism or Acts of War” Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D. (NYU Child Study Center Web site)*
- “Of war and words: talking to children about conflict” Jennifer Wolcott (Christian Science Monitor)*
- “Talking With Kids About War & Violence” (PBS Parents Web site)*
- “Dealing with Tough Topics in the Family: Helping Families Talk Together about War, Violence, and Terrorism” Martha Miller (PC(USA) Web site)*

Recommended Resources from the PC(USA)

Terrorism and Trauma

- Margaret M. Holmes. *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Magination Press, 2000.
- Fern Reiss. *Terrorism and Kids: Comforting your Child*. Peanut Butter and Jelly Press, September 11, 2001.
- Lenore Terr. *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*. Harper Collins, 1992.

Children’s Questions

- Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. *Where Does God Live? Questions and Answers for Parents and Children*. Triumph Books, 1987.
- Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. *How Do You Spell God? Answers to the Big Questions from Around the World*. Morrow Junior Books, 1995.

There are a variety of books available for parents and for children on this topic. For a more extensive bibliography, please contact me at rveitch@thirdpresbyterian.org