

Guidelines for Talking with Elementary Students About the Possibility of War

For Teachers

This is a difficult time for all of us. The world has become so complex that we can't make sense of it all. So how can we begin to work with children on issues that are overwhelming to us? Children, young and old, are likely more aware and harboring more fears about the potential of war than we might realize. Remember what it was like to be a child and feel anxious about something? Remember the difference if you were able to talk to someone about it and if you weren't? Remember the difference in those adults in your world who made you feel safe enough to bring up your worries and those who seemed unable or unwilling to let you talk about your fears?

Although this is difficult for us, and it is difficult to know how to help children, it is imperative that we do so! We can't take away their fears, but we can help them feel comforted. We can't help them understand the complexities of the situation, but we can help them feel understood. Think of this as an opportunity... a privilege... a blessing... that you find yourself in children's lives at a time when they need us most. When we can't make the situation better, we can help ourselves feel better by reaching out to one another.

It is helpful for children to be able to put words to their fears. That gives a greater sense of empowerment than having adults rush to give quick suggestions about why they shouldn't be afraid. Go into this prepared to tolerate your own discomfort at not being able to take away their pain. We can do this by remembering that giving children time to tell their story or their concerns will often be a greater help to them than any answers we may think we have for them.

Times like this are complex, so what follows will be a collection of ideas. Some of these will work in some settings and some will be better in others. Some may spur you on to ideas of your own. None of this is concrete or exact, but rather a guideline or grist for the mill. So!

A few generalities for starters. We must remember that youth read our "energy" far better than we might wish. For that reason, it is important that we are honest (for our credibility and their sense of integrity is on the line) and that we remain as calm as we can as we talk with them.

Realize that, unless something that is life threatening to you at the moment is unfolding, you can take a moment to collect yourself. Take time to consider what you need to say and need not to say. Take a deep breath.

Often we say way too much for kids. Often we tell them something we need them to ponder and then we rush in with all of our advice and try to placate with clichés. There are tips for discussion below, but as you read them, consider that you won't do all of them all of the time. Begin the process. As soon as children begin to ask questions, focus your attention on what they're telling you they need to know. They may take you in a direction you'd have never realized was a concern.

An example of how much children know in ways we might not realize was very evident in the early aftermath after 9/11/2001. One of the principals for a school in New Jersey

lost several of his past students and friends in the collapse of the towers. A week or two after the disaster, the memorial services were getting under way. He was telling his sons that he'd be going into New York in order to attend some of these services. His early elementary aged son was concerned and said, "Daddy, I don't want you to go into New York. I'm scared you won't be safe." And the pre-school son, who was around four, said, "Oh, you don't have to worry. There isn't a New York any more." When we're having discussions, we need to remember that it is more important for them to talk than listen... it is more important for us to listen than to talk!

A five-year-old child recently was talking with his mother about her new duties as a city council person. The mother was talking about the role of the mayor of the town. The child asked, "Can the mayor stop the war?" Although these parents are very astute and tuned-in, they were entirely surprised at the level of awareness and concern their little ones had. Listen, listen, listen!

A Montessori School Director called with a dilemma on her hands. She had one parent that was adamant that she needed to be finding gas masks for the three-, four- and five-year-olds in her center. She actually was calling to ask whether they were made, and whether she should be considering this. Manufacturers don't make gas masks for toddlers, and for good reason. They wouldn't be able to create the seal needed for proper use. But more importantly, there are many, many different possible threats, most of which we can't predict. Our safety depends on our relationship with our community emergency responders. Better to send parents to be a part of the community planning process than focus on the school. It is unlikely that the school will actually be a target. The school will likely only be involved if it is a community disaster. Perhaps most important to consider is the toll it must be taking on the mental health of the youngster whose mother is so insistent about this!

Perhaps the best idea for what parents can do is to turn to their community leaders. Students and schools will only do as well as they are integrated into a solid, workable community plan. Ask parents to attend city council and county commissioners meetings in order to ask pertinent questions and be certain that they are satisfied with how the school has been considered in the larger plan.

Finally, we need to speak in hopeful terms. That is not to say we don't acknowledge that which is difficult and fear invoking, and it is honest to admit to children that we worry, too, but we must balance that with other thoughts as well. So for every part you speak about that is fear-based with the children, give a thought of reassurance.

Sometimes we feel like we don't have any answers to take away the fear for children and youth. It can be helpful to remind them *and* ourselves that there are people who are working very hard on this... people in our government and in other places of importance that are looking out for us and working to make the situation better.

(See next pages for specific suggestions.)

A few tips for discussion, or when you don't know what else to do:

State the obvious (some examples, depending on the situation):

- “Some of you may be hearing things on the news that is frightening. You might think you're the only one that worries, but others of us may be concerned, too.”
- “Some of your parents have talked with us about the new national alert level of Code Orange. You might have heard about it on the news. This is new for our country to have these alerts, so we're not quite sure what to make of them.”
- (*If you deal with military families*) “This morning several moms and dads left for the Middle East. When people leave, especially when there is the possibility of conflict, we worry about their safety.”

These are just some examples of “stating the obvious.” The purpose of beginning with statements such as these is that:

- they have no value judgment. Nothing is “good” or “bad.”
- they bring everyone in the group or class to a beginning point for discussion by giving a framework.
- it is a statement that you are paying attention to *their* world because you are giving voice to something that concerns them.

Bring the students into the discussion with non-confrontational openers, such as:

- “How many of you had heard about this already?”
- “How many of you have parents who are watching this on the news?”
- “How many of you have families who are in military service?”
- Ask questions that allow students to raise hands or join in verbally.

Instead of asking if they are frightened (because some will deny it if we ask that way), make some *gentle* statements of assumption. Be careful not to direct them toward an individual, but stay within statements about how this might be for people or kids in general, such as:

- “It is not unusual when these kinds of things are on the news that we feel worried (or frightened or anxious).”
- “When things like this are happening, lots of kids worry about their parents (or loved ones, or...)”
- “Sometimes when we lay in bed at night, before we fall asleep, we think back to things that we heard during the day that worried us.”

Now make suggestions of things that can be helpful for kids:

- “Sometimes putting words to our fears can help....
 - “We hear that others have the same thoughts, so we realize we aren't so alone.”
 - “It helps us recognize our feelings, and then we can begin to decide what to do about them.”
 - “Sometimes it helps a lot to find someone older than us who will just listen.”
 - “We could generate a list of ideas for what kids can do when they feel anxious. What are some of your ideas?” (This doesn't put any child on the spot, because they aren't having to “own” their anxiety in front of others, but are in the helping role of coming up with ideas.) Make the list on the board.
 - “Let's read some stories about how other children have managed at times like these.”
 - “Let's do a book together that can help other kids who are concerned.” You could have mini-chapters that kids could draw pictures and write about what

might help. Organization of the book could be chapters such as:

- There are lots of things that kids worry about.
- There are lots of different ways of helping ourselves feel better.
- There are things we wish adults understood about how it is to be a kid.
- There are things that make us hopeful.
- There are things we are doing to feel empowered!

Have fun and remember to focus on the lighter side at least for awhile each day.

- There are lots of things in the world that give me happiness and hope. Let's draw pictures, make lists, find things to cut out of magazines... how many ways can we figure out to show others what gives us hope?
- Play really silly videos or short clips of films that make kids laugh. Lots!
- Play music and let kids dance, throw paper airplanes in class, give kids permission to do things that might not always be tolerated, by giving them their own special moment – you might call them “Moments of Madness” or some other catch phrase so students know this is one time we can be a little outside behavioral expectations for class time.

We are inspired by all of you who work in the trenches with our children every day. Our thanks for all your efforts.

Continue to check our web site as new guides are uploaded regularly. Soon we will add guidelines for parents and activities that both teachers and parents can do with children. Consider adding our site to your internet bookmarks.

Please let us know how you use these ideas, and how we might expand our suggestions. Please email our director, Cheri Lovre, directly at <clovre@earthlink.net> or reach CMI staff at <info@cmionline.org>.

Thanks!