

Guidelines for Talking with Middle/High School 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 adolescents 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 teen-agers, 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 all of 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.

The older the child, the more helpful it is for them 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 angst. Although we often have a special sadness that young children are losing their naiveté, there is also a special regret we have as older children have the capacity to take in the gravity of our current world situation.

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. As our children grow older, their questions and concerns are often remarkably sophisticated. This is probably true for several reasons. In our information age, no kids of any age can be shielded from the news. It is simply everywhere. Too, the older the child, the more they're facing thoughts about what they'll do when they graduate. Many see this as a dismal time to try to go out on one's own. Too, just facing the every day challenges of being a teenager today takes sophistication – dealing with pressures to try drugs and making clear decisions about sex have taken much of the childhood out of growing up.

Pre-teens and teens are very able to converse about the potential of international conflict. Often they don't bring it up to adults but are talking about it amongst themselves. They are often relieved when we broach the subject. If we don't, we may not intend the unspoken message to be "Don't ask – we don't have answers, so we don't want to talk." But that is the kind of assumption kids will sometimes make if we don't bring it up ourselves.

Especially with teenagers, it is important to be able to save face or have a certain level of looking in control. For that reason, it can be very helpful to begin in generalities instead of being very direct with our teenagers about their own fears. The following guidelines will give some possible conversation openers and a line of conversation you might amend to work for your own case. Use the strength of your relationship and your understanding of your students in order to approach these discussions. You may be surprised to realize the level of relief it is for a teenager or pre-teen that someone is insightful or observant enough to realize that they are struggling with this.

A few generalities for starters. We must remember that youth of all ages read our “energy” far better than we might wish. For that reason, it is important that we are honest. Our credibility and their sense of integrity are on the line. Remain calm as you speak.

Unless something that is life threatening is in progress, you can take time 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 youth 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.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11/2001, some schools made time for students to come together in assemblies and classroom meetings to discuss what was happening. They were the most help for students when the students had the opportunity and felt enough safety that they could ask the questions that weighed most heavily on their minds.

In the earliest days, their initial question was often, “Will I be drafted?” Clearly, we can’t make promises we can’t know that we can keep, but we also know that the infrastructure for a military draft would take quite some months or more to put together. We can reassure them that it won’t happen without quite some time of warning.

The next question was, “Who are the terrorists?” This was at a time when there were several prejudicial issues manifesting in New Jersey. One was that there were many families in communities as well as individual students of Middle Eastern decent that were tormented by Anglo students. There were also a few very small pockets of Middle Easterners who were celebrating Bin Laden and the terrorists’ actions. There were huge concerns about increasing violence both toward those who were innocent Americans and toward those who did not hold the mainstream values about the attacks. In order to address questions regarding terrorism, there is a sequence below called “The Continuum of Love and Hate.”

There are many, many different possible threats, none of which can we predict with any certainty. 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.

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 are fear-based with the children, give a thought of reassurance.

Make room for silence. Although it is often uncomfortable, when we rush to fill it with words, we take away some of the deepest processing that students can do. It is usually our own discomfort that drives us to fill silence with words. Let them ponder. Wait for them!

Sometimes we feel like we don’t have any answers to take away the fear for 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.

A few tips for 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 alarming. 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 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 anxious (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 teens 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.”
- Try to stay away from the statement “What you're feeling is *normal* for this *abnormal* circumstance. Often, nothing about this kind of anxiety feels normal. Use other words, such as “I think it is not unusual for students to feel that way,” or “I've heard others say the same kinds of things,” or “These are the kinds of reactions we often have when things seem to change rapidly....” There are many ways to *normalize* their reactions without using the word “normal.”

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 we 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.)

- “What well-known stories or historical examples do can we come up with that are about how other teenagers and families have managed at times like these?”
- “Let’s do a book together that can help younger kids who are concerned.” Activities that help youth generate ideas feel empowering. They’re more apt to come up with ideas that relate to how younger children are feeling, so this is one step in coming up with ideas for themselves as well.
 - Organization of the book could be:
 - 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 teenager today.
 - Here are some ideas to help us feel empowered.
- The Continuum of Love and Hate:
 - Draw a long line on the board or on a long piece of butcher paper. Consider having each student doing this themselves on a piece of paper as well. They may represent some things independently of what you do as a group.
 - On one end, write “Mother Teresa” or “Gandhi” or someone like that.
 - On the other end, have “Hitler” or some other raging terrifying person.
 - Talk about how we each have a range of behaviors, and how on our good days, we are a little closer to Mother Teresa on the continuum, and on our worst days, we are further away. Suggest to students that they may have people in their lives who represent particularly positive traits, and they could add them where they belong on their line representing the continuum of behaviors.
 - We each could put two lines to represent our range of behaviors on that line. That range wouldn’t be a large gap, but we all know that we have some good days and some not so good!
 - Now take the discussion away from people to behaviors. “What are the kinds of actions that people take that could be classified as terrorism? What makes terrorism different than conventional war?”
 - Terrorism is random, unprovoked, and targets a civilian population rather than focusing on military actions
 - Terrorism is perpetrated by disenfranchised people who feel no empathy for most people, or for people who do not belong to their own group.
 - Terrorism is not limited to any nationality, ethnic group or socio-economic group.
 - Terrorism often has an ideological basis, at least as an excuse, though not always.
 - Now ask, “Who are the terrorists we’ve raised here in American, who have gone to our high schools?”
 - Timothy McVey (Oklahoma City bombing)
 - Ted Kaczynski (The Unabomber)
 - Ma Anand Sheila (The Rajneeshies in Oregon who poisoned a salad bar)
 - Unsolved – the person who sent anthrax in the mail after 9/11/2001 was in the US and likely an American
 - Others?
 - This could be a research project – have students find other examples
 - “What might have happened in these people’s lives that they became so disenfranchised from others in their world?”

- Make a long list of behaviors that people do to others that isolate us. Included in this list may be behaviors that students do to each other, but if not, you'll be asking for it soon.
- “When you think about these attitudes and behaviors that bring people to a place of feeling that kind of pent up rage and anger, what are some of the behaviors we see in the hallways of our school that contribute to some of our students having that kind of pent-up rage?”
 - Begin the list! Continue adding until it is a good-sized list with some fairly specific examples.
 - Add those that students have heard of in other schools and other settings.
- “What would need to happen in our school for this to change?”
 - This is a time for students to begin to look at how there are more people contributing to bullying and harassment than the perpetrator and the victim. That we see these things happen in the hallways often. If we stand by without standing up for the victim, we contribute to an environment that contributes to violence and certainly also to potential terrorism in our own country, perpetrated by our own citizens toward each other.
 - Now take this on. Get students involved in a plan to change attitudes in the school. It can't be legislated. It can't be about discipline. It has to be an attitude change on the part of students. *(As an aside – we at Crisis Management Institute would love to hear from you how you have involved students in change and what they have instituted.)*

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 us happiness and hope. Is there a wall that the art teacher could use to coordinate a student-driven project to create a mural of hope? How can students make something visual with a large presence to help keep hope and inspiration in view?
- Play really silly videos or short clips of films that make kids laugh. Have kids come up with their own “Moments of Madness” to lead in class. Create laughter.... Lots!
- Help students organize lots of ways to get together on weekends and evenings that are just for the sake of fun. Have older students organize fun gatherings for children in elementary schools. Lots of times this is not expensive, just takes planning and ideas.

Now! As much as you can, you go have some fun sometimes, too. Take time for renewal.

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!