

## A Parent's Guide to Talking with Your Child About the Impending War With Iraq

Children and youth often know more, worry about more and ask less than we realize. Take a moment and think back to your childhood. For many of us, there were times when something happened that might have caused us worry, but if the adults in our world didn't bring it up, we may have worried in silence. Often parents say, "I think she's doing fine – she doesn't talk about it..." or "... she isn't asking any questions." Children listen when we're on the phone to others at times we may not realize. They have questions they may not ask unless we provide the opportunity.

This guide provides some ideas for bringing up difficult topics and helping you reassure your child. This is just that -- a *guide* with *ideas*. There is no one "right way" to talk with your child. Families who live close to where the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01 occurred may have a different level of anxiety about this impending war than those who live in a rural part of, say, Montana or Kansas.

**When you don't know how else to bring something up, state the obvious.** No judgment, no blame, just state the obvious. Some suggestions for this might be:

- "There has been more on the news lately about the possibility of war with Iraq. Sometimes when that kind of news is on television, kids feel confused or concerned about what it means. What kind of thoughts have you had?"
- "We received a letter from your teacher and it says that they're helping you understand new procedures at school in case we have a terrorist attack. What are your classmates saying about this?"
- "A while back, we had some national alerts and we changed to Code Orange. This kind of thing is new for our country, so we don't always know what that means. What do *you* think that means?" ... or... "What are kids saying about that?"

**Speak in hopeful terms.** There are several options, here:

- People high up in government are working on these complex issues, and we're hoping they will make good decisions that help keep us safe.
- Although we don't always know how we will cope with something, the most difficult part is often during periods of anticipation. Once we know what is actually going to unfold, we can start to put measures in place.
- Emphasize that you'll get through this together. Children of all ages need to hear that they aren't having to figure this out alone, that you're really there for them, wanting to support them, wanting to hear their concerns.

**Make it easy for kids to reveal their concerns to you.** Often, if we ask a child, "Are you worried?" the answer is likely to be "no." But if you ask, "When you are concerned about this, what part worries you?" This is a **statement of assumption**. You are letting your child hear that you assume they have concerns, and you'd like insights from them on what that is like for them. Another helpful approach is to distance the child from feeling like they're having to reveal concerns they have personally to concerns they think other students might have. An example of that is, "What do you think other kids your age might be worrying about?" This gives them a chance to voice a concern without having it be too close to home, so to speak.

**Be honest with your children.** Both your integrity and their own is on the line. How much detail you give and the context in which you put something is where you have room for judgment. But you can't recapture the trust that you lose if your child realizes

that you aren't truthful. So... when children ask difficult questions, it is fine for your answer to be, "I don't know." But where do you go at that point?

- From there you can suggest that you'll try to find out more about something.
- You can move from those things you can't solve to statements about how people have coped with difficult times since the beginning of time. We didn't know how we were going to get through 9/11/2001, either, but sure enough – people coped and rejuvenated the city and Manhattan and Washington DC continue to function and be home to people and have business going on as usual.
- Admit that you have concerns too, but then go on to talk about what you do that helps you feel safe. It might be preparations you've made, or it might be about your faith, or it might have to do with your community and support systems.

**Limit or eliminate your child's viewing of television coverage.** There is a psychological saturation from television coverage that can actually result in symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Our brains are in a receptive mode that is very different than when we listen to coverage on the radio or read a newspaper. Print and audio-only media allow our minds to question, to create our own pictures, or create no visual imagining at all. But with television coverage, we often "can't get it out of our minds." A great example of that was how many people were haunted by the coverage of people jumping from the towers on 9/11/01. There is nothing positive about children being haunted by those kinds of visuals, and there are many other options for how children and youth can remain informed.

**Differentiate between war and terrorism** and help your child with realistic reassurances. War with Iraq is hours and hours away by airplane, or days and days away by car and boat... help your child with the geography of this for those issues related to fears about the war. Younger children may think that the war is being carried out very close to home.

**Have faith in your child's ability to cope.** Often we sell kids short on their abilities to cope with bad news. Their ability to cope is **directly related to your own stability and what they read in your "energy."** So if you are calm, measured, honest, concerned, compassionate and open, your children will be much more apt to trust that they'll be OK than if you are evasive, silent or over-reactive.

**Empower your child.** Whether you believe the war is a good idea or a bad one, writing representatives, attending rallies or writing letters to servicemen can help children can feel empowered. Ask you child, "What will help you feel better/safer?"

**Accept short-term regression:** For some students of any age, this may be a time when, for awhile, they want to sleep close to you or leave a night light on. Younger children may be clingy or wet the bed when they haven't for some time. Take it all in stride, don't over-react, and give some special indulgences. Bring out the sleeping bags!

**Remember the value of laughter and fun!** More than ever, be sure you create times that are just for fun every day. Integrate in new ways of doing this... laughter actually helps our immune system and depression shuts it down. This is not just for fun, its for health!

*Feel free to go to our web site at <[www.cmionline.org](http://www.cmionline.org)> and download the guidelines for teachers and administrators. Although not written for the perspective of parents, they will give you additional ideas and more thoughts for consideration. Also, **continue to look for updates.** As things progress and change, we will continue to post helpful guidelines for parents and schools.*