

Talking With Children About the Prison Abuse in Iraq

A Guide for Administrators and Teachers

Watching the news about the prison abuse is difficult for all of us – as compassionate people, as Americans, and perhaps it is especially difficult as educators. Seeing the graphic displays of abuse to hooded, naked, tormented prisoners is bad enough. But beginning to grasp what it is within an individual – an American – someone who lived in this great nation of ours and enjoyed freedom and the pursuit of happiness – it stretches our minds in ways that defy description to accept that this can even be true. What is it in the human make-up that can allow one to so entirely go beyond the boundaries we hold as basic decency? And what do we say – or not say – to our students?

Schools are in a special position in children's lives. We must be careful not to frame issues in ways that may be at odds with family values, yet we are here to educate children. Although some argue that education can be reduced to content areas, forward-thinking leaders agree that we must look at the whole child, which includes development of morals and values. Any middle school teacher knows that a significant part of the job is socializing students and working on appropriate behavior.

With the dramatic increased focus in recent years on school climate and prevention of bullying, discussions of attitude, respect and values have become a part of school. Each district, however, has to make decisions about what to say or not say about issues as dissonant and highly-charged as the prisoner abuse, and part of that decision will be made by taking into account the values inherent in that particular community.

That being said, there are major considerations to be made in this case. We often hesitate to engage our students in conversations about these kinds of things. We often discourage them from telling us of their fears or thoughts about terrible events or possibilities. There may be several reasons for this, a few of which might be:

We want to protect them – from that positive place that believes that childhood should be a time of naivety and playfulness, we don't want this to be part of their awareness.

We think that to bring it up validates how awful it is, and that maybe if we don't talk about it, they aren't really thinking about it.

We feel helpless to find a reply that can make it better – if we aren't sure that we can take away their fears, we'd rather not go close to it. And we're used to thinking that we have answers.

The issue is so haunting to us that we don't even want to talk about it with other adults, much less with our students or our own children. There is no specific age that is "old enough" or "not old enough" to talk about this. If your students know about it, then that is "old enough" to give this serious consideration.

Students take their cues from us. If we don't bring it up, often they "respect" our avoidance. But that doesn't mean that they aren't taking it all in and giving their own meanings to what they see. That doesn't mean that they aren't harboring fears and talking about this with their peers. And if they only talk with peers, and not with adults, there is no one to give them context or perspective or hope.

Encountering these pictures assaults our very sense of well-being. We can't help but be bothered. Realize that the more graphic the visual coverage, the greater the likelihood of psychological trauma. This is true for us as adults, and it is true for our children as well. So what to do? How do we begin to talk with students about these events? Let's look at some of the elements of the situation, and then look at the language and concepts we might consider.



Looking at the Issues

War brings things out in us that are beneath human dignity. This is not the first war that has brought about horrific abuse on the part of those with power against those without. This in no way condones what Americans have done to these prisoners, but it is an honest assessment of war. Some people who are sent into war, for reasons we cannot even begin to imagine or describe unless we've been to war, are moved to do terrible, horrible, hurtful, painful, appalling things they would not have otherwise done.

In certain situations, there is a group mentality that begins to take over our own sense of integrity. There are lots of examples of this that range from the horrors of war to mob mentality at major sports events. This does not mean that each individual is not responsible for his or her own behavior. It does mean that we all need to be mindful of the many ways we are influenced by those around us.

What these people did are things that they know they would never want done to themselves or anyone they love. Likely many of the Americans we see in these photos, appearing to enjoy seeing Iraqi's tortured, are people who would not have done this sort of thing if they'd never gone to war. They all undoubtedly would not accept this behavior or torture done to anyone who they knew, loved, or even to Americans they didn't know. To do this, they have cut themselves off from their conscience. This disconnection from their values may never have happened to them in any other setting.

So What Can Teachers Do?

Turn off the television. Do not shield your students from the truth, but protect them from the graphic images that can lead to a variety of trauma-based reactions, including anxiety, fear, issues with trust in the world, nightmares, as well as others. There is a psychological saturation that occurs from visual media. **Consider carefully the age and capacity of your students before deciding whether to also shield them from print media pictures as well.** Even the still pictures are overwhelming and disturbing for adults. Pictures are even more overwhelming for children.

Listen more than you talk. It is much more helpful for students to have the support to voice their own reality than it is for us to try to foist ours on them. Students need help finding words to express new fears, new feelings, new reactions. They are not likely to bring it up without your doing so initially, but your bringing it up needs to be in order to give sanction to them to talk about it. Once you put it on the table, the goal is for the youth to talk and, for the most part, for adults to listen.

Give them context. Although our country is at threat of terrorist attacks, we are not at threat of having large-scale torture perpetrated on us. Help students understand that, although torturing others is something that is a part of the human capacity, this kind of abuse most often occurs in the context of war.

Talk in terms of degree. This is a two-way concept. On one level, what is outrageously objectionable is the degree of pain, humiliation and torture... on another level, being mean to people is never OK. Depending on the age of your students, you might portray it in these terms:

***Pre-school and Elementary aged youth:** It is very, very unusual for people to be in these situations and to decide to do such painful and hurtful things to others. Many, many of our soldiers and Americans who are in Iraq are feeling very badly, just like we are, about what has happened. But it is always our job as caring, decent people, to stand up for victims of abuse. You could then put it in*



the context of, when they see someone being bullied on the playground, it is all of our responsibilities to stop the bully. For children, that means enlisting the help of an adult rather than shying away. Give them a clear understanding of the difference in finding adult help vs. taking it into their own hands and becoming inappropriately physically involved. You can bring the conversation from “over there” in Iraq to what happens in our own world, and for younger children, that is about what happens when they play together or when they’re at school. Encourage them to think about what the kinds of things are that happen to children that bring them to be mean to each other. This is an opportunity for teachers to reinforce the importance of kindness, consideration, responsibility and other attributes of character.

Middle School youth: *Building on the concepts above for elementary aged youth, take the concept further to engage in deeper discussion about what brings people to a place of being willing to do hurtful things to others. By this age, students can engage in discussion about stereotypes, prejudice, and how it is that we can come to a place of forgetting that all people are human, that no one social or political group has the right to repress or torture another. Discussion can look at what some of the social pressures are that bring students to do things for which they feel badly later.*

High School students: *Taking the concepts above, by high school, teenagers are able to be very philosophical and analytical in their discussion. In addition to the concepts covered in the middle school level discussion, high schoolers can begin to discuss the greater political implications of having even just a few of our servicemen and women do this kind of abuse and torture. You might examine issues such as the powerfully negative effect this will have on the Iraqi public opinion toward the United States. Lead with inquiry, asking questions such as: Will this be likely to fuel or quell the desires of terrorists to retaliate with future acts of terror? Will this be likely to put our servicemen and women who are currently serving in Iraq at greater risk or greater safety? Do you think this will bring more Iraqis to appreciate our attempts at bringing them to a stable place politically or does this breed contempt? High school students will be able to come up with their own examples and ideas about the consequences of this abuse and torture.*

When discussing the prisoner abuse with students, realize that, although you are putting that on the table as a topic that can be discussed, the discussion can move from the abuse to bigger issues, lessons, perspectives, and issues closer to home for all of us. The discussion is least effective if it only focuses on the prisoner abuse. This is a teachable moment when we can consider much greater implications and generalizations that hold meaning and lessons in our lives every day. This is a time when, as educators, you can reiterate and reinforce our cultural values about how people need to treat each other. The Geneva Convention, the Nuremberg Trials and other post-war actions to address treatment of people in political situations are just a beginning for examining the ways that these values go beyond our own culture.

Help students think about how they would want to be treated, or how they would want their loved ones treated. What if we *did* have another country that started a war with us and their soldiers were in our streets. How would we want them to treat people they arrested from our city or town? Even in war, the Geneva Convention confirms, we have a responsibility to treat others with a certain level of respect and dignity. We don’t have to like them or what they stand for. But even in war, there are rules.

Language You Might Use

Sometimes it is the most help of all to have some language – some examples of sentences or concepts one might use to open the discussion. Here are a few examples:



There has been lots of coverage of the abuse to prisoners in Iraq. When things like this happen, kids have all different kinds of thoughts. What are kids your age thinking about this? What are kids saying?

I've been terribly bothered – in ways for which I can't even find words – watching (or hearing, or reading) the coverage about what Americans have done to prisoners in Iraq. I watch (or read, or hear) about it, and I realize how badly I feel, and I wonder how this is for you. How are you doing with this?

Do you suppose that there are Iraqi mothers and fathers who love their children like your parents love you? What do you suppose it is like for them to try to raise their children with army tanks in the streets and armed soldiers everywhere? What kind of a life would you want the families in Iraq who are peace-loving, and who are kind, and who love each other – what kind of a life would you want them to have right now?

All the adults in your world who love you want to be able to protect you from the world! People all over the world see their children as precious. We want to be able to give you values so you'll be a caring person, and for kids to have a playful childhood. It is sad to for adults that there are these things that don't let you grow up as carefree as we would wish. What do you wish adults understood about how it is to be a kid in the world today?

That last question is probably the most revealing question you could ask your students! When you ask it, realize that the best response on your part is to listen, listen, listen. Don't rush in to tell your students why they shouldn't be scared about this, or be angry about that... don't react with statements that judge or qualify or quantify. Instead, take a deep breath and nod, and make those little sounds that indicate that you're listening intently. But don't change the direction of the conversation. Let them reveal to you who they are internally. Instead of trying to foist your views on them, take this time to share how pleased you are that they are willing to trust you with their innermost feelings. This is a time to stretch your capacity to listen to their pain and angst and validate that you believe that what they are telling you is true for them. That doesn't mean that you are telling them that their feelings are right or wrong as a whole, but that their feelings are right for them. If they tell you that's what they feel, that is their human response at this moment. Remember that feelings are transitory, and their feelings are likely to change over time.

And finally, be sure to consider bringing things to a more positive focus:

When we think of how many people there are in the world, the number of people who suffer at the hands of people like this are very small.... This is still terribly important, but so are the thousands of wonderful things that people do to help each other every day.

Let's make a list of famous people who have done good in the world (Gandhi, Nelson Mandella...)

Let's make a list of people in our own lives who do things that help others just because that is who they are?

What are signs of hope and joy in our lives? (Spring, faith, family....)

If there were a single thing that I could do for you, or something we could do together, or something we could suggest that your teacher do at school, or anything else – if there were a single thing that we could do that would help you feel better right now, what would that be?

What is one thing we could do to make someone else feel better? Anybody – about anything!

