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Helping Children Cope in Unsettling Times Tips for Parents and Teachers

Americans and people around the world are presently facing difficult and unsettling times. Concerns over war, a struggling economy, and the continued threat of terrorism dominate the news. The nation's heightened state of alert has many people on edge. The uncertainty of the warnings (not knowing when, where, or what may happen) can be especially unnerving, and the cumulative effect of past events may intensify our reactions.

Children may become confused or fearful that they or their loved ones are at risk. **Adults need to help children feel safe**, even if they themselves are feeling more vulnerable. Parents and teachers must help youngsters understand current events factually, how events do or do not impact their lives, and how to handle their emotional reactions. The guidance of caring adults can make the difference between being overwhelmed by circumstances we cannot control and developing critical life-long emotional and psychological coping skills.

Schools and parents need to assess what level of support children in their care need, but following suggestions may help children cope.

Identify Vulnerable Populations. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- live in proximity to past traumatic events or high target areas
- have suffered a personal loss from or had firsthand exposure to terrorism, violence or military actions
- have parents currently in the military or in active duty in the reserve forces
- have parents who fought in past conflicts like the Gulf War
- have parents involved in emergency response or public safety
- are of non-U.S. origin and may feel threatened by intolerance or racism
- suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, depression or other mental illness

Remain calm and reassuring. Children will take their cues from you, especially young children. Acknowledge that the threats and uncertainty are unnerving but the likelihood is that you and your children or students will be okay. There is difference between the *possibility* of danger and the *probability* of it affecting them personally.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage any questions they may have regarding this event. Listen and empathize. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that others are feeling the same way and that their reactions are normal and expected.

Take care of your own needs. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are

coping well. **If you are anxious or upset, your children are more likely to be so as well.** Talk to other adults such as family, friends, faith leaders, or a counselor. °It is important not to dwell on your fears by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes us feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.**

Maintain a normal routine. Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don t push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Spend family time. Doing enjoyable activities with you reinforces your children s sense of stability and normalcy. Try to do things together, such as eat meals, read, play sports or games, go for walks or bike rides, or watch non-violent, non-stressful TV, etc. Young children may also want more physical contact (e.g., hugs, holding hands, sitting on your lap, etc.). You know your children best, and your love and support are the most important factors to their sense of security.

Emphasize people s resiliency. Focus on children s competencies in terms of their daily life and in other difficult times. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Also remind them that the country has weathered many other crises, including terrorism, natural disasters and war, and has emerged stronger and more united each time.

Be optimistic. Even if something does happen, most people will be fine physically and will recover from any emotional reactions to the event. Resiliency studies following September 11 indicate that people who coped best were comfortable expressing strong emotions, surrounded by caring family and friends, kept a positive view of the future, and utilized problem solving skills.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. °If they are not anxious or focused on current events, don t dwell on them. But be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school age children and adolescents can discuss their concerns although they may need you to provide an opening to start a conversation. Don t push, but ask what they think about current events. Even if they don t want or need to talk now, they may later and they will know you care what they think and feel.

TURN OFF OR MONITOR THE TELEVISION. °It is important to stay informed, but watching endless news programs is likely to heighten your anxiety and that of your children or students. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between images on T.V. and their personal reality. Older children may want to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and help put it into perspective.

Discuss events in age-appropriate terms. Share information that is appropriate to their age and developmental level. Update them as information changes. Young children may require repeated reassurance during the day. Tell them they are okay and that adults will always take care of them. School age children can understand details and reasons behind specific actions, such as increased security but cannot absorb intense or frightening information. Adolescents may want to discuss issues related to terrorism or war as well as safety issues.

Stick to the facts. Answer children's questions factually and include a positive element to answer, e.g., "Yes we are on high alert, but we have been here before. It does not mean that something bad will definitely happen." "Yes, we may go to war, but our troops will keep us safe. Yes, there are more armed guards on our streets, but they are there to protect us." "Don't speculate about what *could* happen."

Differentiate between war and terrorism. The conflict in the Gulf will be a highly visible event. Children are likely to see images of and hear about suffering and death and may confuse these far away actions with potential danger at home particularly young children. Older children may be aware of heightened risk of terrorism because of the war, but you can distinguish between the two types of actions. Acts of war involve attacks on military targets and are, in effect, government-to-government actions linked to official foreign policy objectives. Terrorism targets innocent individuals with the goal of inflicting harm and terror.

Be willing to discuss the concept of death. Children may be more concerned about dying or their loved one dying, particularly given the intense focus on death in the wake of earlier terrorist attacks. Talking with them is important. Outside resources can be very helpful (e.g., books geared to different ages that explore death and dying, grief and hospice organizations, or your faith community, if part of your family life). If a child comes from a home with a resilient belief system or faith, it will likely provide a powerful source of support when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Have a family plan. This should involve a way to get in touch with each other, a meeting place, friends or neighbors who can help, emergency supplies, etc. This is important not only if something does happen but it also will help you feel more in control now. Events that are judged to be out of control are especially frightening. Thus, anything children can do to control their situation will be helpful. Most older children can participate in this process and will probably feel better if they do. However, assess your younger children's understanding of the situation. Don't involve them in this planning if you think doing so will **only** serve to heighten their awareness of the danger.

Communicate with your children's school. Find out what they are learning. Share any concerns you have with teachers including if you have a family member on active duty. Encourage the teacher to keep you informed as well. Remember that teachers might be under heightened stress like everyone else. Not only are they providing extra support to their students, they may also have loved ones who are called to active duty and/or trying to cope with their own personal reactions to events.

Teachers should assess student needs. Talk to colleagues. Share your ideas and concerns. This will help you manage your own anxieties as well as determine the needs of the general student body and individual students. Also take cues from what your students do and say. Know who has family overseas or another risk factor.

Make time for class discussion (or activities if the children are young). Be sure to have a map or globe. Be prepared to answer questions factually or to guide discussion about difficult issues. Seek the help of your school psychologist or counselor if you are unsure of what to say. Be careful of large group discussion about the war or political issues if your students have strongly differing opinions. Such discussion can turn adversarial when emotions are running high. If need be, hold discussions in smaller, more homogenous groups or individually. Again, your school psychologist or counselor can help.

Stop bullying or harassment immediately. Remind children not to pass judgment on groups of people or other people's ideas just because they seem different. Finding ways to address the intolerance that leads to conflict and aggression can be one way to help children regain a sense of control over this situation.

Encourage children to talk to you or another caring adult. Emphasize that you are there to help and that they should let an adult know if they or a friend feels overwhelmed for any reason.

Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need. Making a positive contribution to the community or country helps people feel more in control and builds a stronger sense of connection. One suggestion is to find out if there are families in your community with parents being deployed. They may need babysitting, errands run, snow shoveling, etc.

Potential child/adolescent reactions to trauma. Most children will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms over an extended period of time.

Preschoolers thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.

Elementary School Children irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.

Adolescents sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration.

Resources

There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with the stress of war, terrorism and other crises:

- Army Deployment Handbook <http://www.wood.army.mil/mwr/deploymenthndbook.htm>
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <http://aacap.org>
- American Red Cross <http://www.redcross.org>
- American School Counselors Association, www.schoolcounselor.org
- American Psychological Association www.apa.org
- Federal Emergency Management Agency <http://www.fema.org/>
- National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org
- National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
www.ncptsd.org/facts/specific/fs_children.html

Adapted material posted on the NASP website following the September 2001 terrorist attacks.
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