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Talking to Kids ABOUT War

By John Philip Jackman

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A few days ago, my 8 year old daughter asked my wife What state is Iraq? My wife explained that Iraq is not a state, but another country. This led to a number of other questions: Why are they fighting? Why is Saddam Hussein bad? And finally, in a very round-about way, she came to the real question: Are we safe?

Unless you live in a sealed vacuum, your children know theres a war on. The war is everywhere. Just as with the news coverage of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the coverage is wall-to-wall. Local news stations arent covering local news; regular programming is preempted with speculation and commentary. The visuals, the bombs, the strident music, are not lost on them. They absorb these things, and wonder about them, and formulate explanations and questions.

The news channels are pumping wall-to-wall coverage into your home because it will increase their ratings. Things that make us tense and fearful boost ratings, and thus boost profits. They will not stop; the likelihood is that they will do more, with little regard or respect for the impact that the coverage might have on children. So it is up to parents to take control of the TV and protect their children from excessive exposure, and it is up to parents to answer the questions and calm the fears.

Ill never forget hearing about the child of a man who worked in the World Trade Center when it was hit by a jumbo jet. She would only watch The Food Network so that she would not have to watch her father die again and again and again. And again.

How we react to news of war or terrorism will strongly influence how our children are affected. If we react with fear, obsessively watching every minute, every replay, then our children will be affected more deeply and will be more anxious and fearful. I was saddened after 9/11 to see many well-educated parents reacting this way. People in my town were stocking up, looking suspiciously at every Muslim, and speculating as to whether we might be next. That fact that Al Quaida would only hit Lewisville, NC by sheer accident and miscalculation never occurred to them; and I could see the

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anxiety level in their children rise to disturbing levels.

Children need to be reassured that they are safe. They need age–appropriate explanations of what is going on. But above all they depend on us as parents to protect them from the unnecessary and irrational fear that TV coverage can create. Even for families who have a loved one in battle, who for understandable reasons find themselves dragged to the TV every moment, the statistical chances are very good that their loved one will return. 98% of servicemen returned from World War II.

Here are ten tips for talking to children about war or terrorism:

1. Talk to children about the war and the terrorists. Many parents fear that talking about violent acts will increase their childrens fear, but in fact the reverse is the case. When children keep scared feelings bottled up, their fears may be far worse than reality. You cant reassure them if you dont talk about it.
2. Talk about hate, anger, and bullies. Why do people do terrible things? Talk about tolerance and non–violent solutions to smaller problems. The terrorists are far away, but theres a bully in every schoolyard.
3. Reassure them they are safe. The war is far away, and Osama Bin Laden has never heard of Fleetwood, Pennsylvania or Grapevine, Texas. Even if you live in New York City or Washington, D.C. you can honestly reassure you children that they are safe.
4. Find out what their fears are. Dont assume you know what your children are thinking. Children often personalize fears, and may be afraid their school will be bombed or that any airplane might fly into a building.
5. Consider the age. You will talk differently to a four–year–old than a ten–year–old.
6. Limit television, radio, and newspaper exposure. Children simply dont need to hear about the war all the time. I dont think adults should be exposed to this constant barrage! Make sure that your childs exposure to graphic coverage is very limited.
7. Tell your child what you think. Do you support the war? Are you opposed to the war? Use this as an opportunity to share your values in an age–appropriate way.
8. Avoid generalizations and racist statements! Casual comments about those Arabs or those Muslims, even in jest, will be noted by your child. The current conflict is a perfect opportunity to talk about how there are good and bad people of every race and religion. Keep in mind the song from South Pacific:

You have to be taught
Before it's too late.
Before you are six or seven or eight
to hate all the people your relatives hate.

You have to be carefully taught.

If we teach our children by example to that its OK to hate all Muslims or all Iraqis, how are we better than the Taliban or Al–Quaida?

9. Distinguish between patriotism and political opinion. The true American tradition is freedom of political expression. Feel free to tell children that you disagree with some people, but emphasize their right to have their own opinion.

10. If you have a relative in the battle, or a family friend deployed in Iraq, the situation is much more difficult. Everyone, adults and children, will be anxious and troubled. You wont be able to help it. Marshall your own fears with spiritual support from your religion, from relatives, from friends. Focus on the fact that your loved one is far more likely to return than to be killed or injured. Be extra careful not to have the TV on all the time, no matter how compelling it might seem. Reassure your children that Uncle Bob will be fine. Statistically, this is probably true — and it does not help children to imagine the worst. Take action together send an email through www.emailourmilitary.com or through the appropriate service branch, make a poster, tie a yellow ribbon, plan the loved ones return party.

Children today are subjected to influences that cause them to be unnecessarily fearful and anxious. A

major source of this is television. TV coverage of war, terrorism, and violent crime are things we need to protect our children from if they are to have a chance to be children. Kids dont need to shoulder adult burdens.

The Rev. John Jackman, an ordained minister, is Executive Director of Comenius Foundation, an independent nonprofit that advocates for responsible television. Comenius Foundation sponsors a free web site, www.changingchannels.org, with more information about how you can limit the negative effects of television on your children.

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Ten Ways to Get Your Kids to Listen to You

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

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There are times when every parent feels as if they might as well be talking to a block of wood. As with many other things, the harder you try to get your kids to listen, the more resistance you get. Here are ten things to consider when you want to get a message across:

1.) Make sure your relationship is solid.

If your kids don't like you, they're a lot less likely to listen to you.

2.) Remember that actions speak louder than words.

If your kids know that what you say won't be backed up with action, they'll more easily tune you out. Having natural consequences for not listening (toys disappear if kids don't listen and they're not picked up) has a way of having kids pay better attention.

3.) Talk about listening to them.

Make it a point to discuss the importance of listening occasionally when your kids are receptive. Talk about how nice it feels when someone else listens to you completely and what a great quality this is.

4.) Have a sense of timing when you talk to your kids.

Don't expect them to listen well when they're in the middle of something, when they're extremely tired, or when they're hungry. Find a time when they're reasonably relaxed and you have their full attention.

5.) Model great listening yourself.

Give them your absolute attention when they speak to you and try to reflect back what you heard so they can see how focused you were on what they were saying.

6.) Each child listens in a unique way, get to know their preferred style.

Your child may be a kinesthetic learner who listens and understands by writing something down or by walking through something. Find the way to reach your child in the way that works best.

7. Avoid Lectures

Many parents have a lecturing style that they're unaware of. Their kids are very aware of this style however, and tune them out. Speak in a casual and pleasant tone that you would use when talking with a friend

8. Limit their TV watching.

Kids who watch a lot of TV tend to be more easily distracted and have a more difficult time listening. This may also help to improve your relationship when you spend more time with

your kids!

9. Talk to your kids in a non-judgmental way.

The more they feel judged by you, the more shame they'll feel and the less they'll hear. See your kids as great and they'll listen as though they are!

10. Be genuinely interested in your children's lives.

Ask them curious questions about what's they're experiencing. When your kids know that you have a real interest in their life, they're more likely to look forward to what you have to say.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" (http://www.markbrandenburg.com/e_book.htm#secrets). For more great tips and action steps for fathers, sign up for his FREE bi-weekly newsletter, "Dads, Don't Fix Your Kids," at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com>

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