

Tips for Parents During a Time of Crisis

Our nation has been blessed with peace for so long that it is hard to completely predict how individuals will react emotionally to this current crisis with Iraq. Fear and uncertainty about our basic sense of safety and security are normal responses during such times. In spite of our own fears, it is important to remember that our job as parents is to help our children cope with feelings and events that may seem overwhelming to them.

Some ways that parents can provide a reassuring home environment are:

- ❖ Exhibit a sense of calmness and confidence, even though you may feel otherwise.
- ❖ Maintain your daily routine. Keeping up your daily routine of work, errands, household chores and hobbies provides you and your child with a feeling of stability when the world around you seems chaotic.
- ❖ Take care of yourself. Make time to eat properly, exercise, and rest. Schedule time to do things you enjoy such as hobbies and social activities. Caring for yourself and even having fun will help you stay balanced and enable you to better deal with stressful times.
- ❖ Make connections. Keep in touch with family, friends and others. Connecting with people provides social support, comfort, and strengthens resilience.
- ❖ Give yourself a "news break." Be sure to control the amount of time you and your family spend watching and reading war-related news coverage. Consider limiting your new intake to no more than one hour a day. It's okay to turn off the TV or radio, and allow yourself to focus on non-war-related things.
- ❖ Have a plan. Having an emergency plan in place will make you feel in control and prepared for the unexpected. Establish a clear plan for how you, your family, and friends will respond and connect in the event of a crisis. Have a family or neighborhood meeting to talk about whom to call in emergencies, or designate a place to meet if you can't reach someone by phone. Make a plan for your pets and a list of items you will need to take in an emergency.

Adapted from the website of the American Psychological Association. For additional information, call toll-free 1-800-964-2000, or download free from www.helping.apa.org <<http://www.helping.apa.org>>.

Encouraging our children to talk to us and listening calmly to their responses are vital parenting skills, especially during uncertain times. Suggested guidelines are:

- ❖ Ask, "What have you been hearing about the war?" Begin a dialogue by showing an interest in your child's thoughts, ideas and feelings. Ask him what he has heard at school. Ask what his friends think. Ask what he has heard on the news. Ask if he has questions.
- ❖ Listen carefully to your child's answers. Ask clarifying questions such as, "Why do you think that? How do you think that happened? What do you think will happen next?" As we listen, our goal should be to understand our child's opinion and feelings, not to argue to prove them wrong. Show a sincere interest in your child's opinion and it won't be long before you hear, "What do you think, Dad?"
- ❖ Limit and monitor your child's television viewing: "You can only watch TV for 30 minutes, and I want to be present." Be cautious about what you allow your child to view; take into consideration your child's age and maturity level. Younger children may be horrified by news coverage, and may experience side effects such as nightmares, fear of being away from parents, and a variety of other emotions.

- ❖ War on TV can be graphic. Seeing real human beings killed with the precision and repetition of a video game can have a numbing effect on children. War is not a game. Neither is it a sixty-minute drama interlaced with commercials. The war-related television programs that children watch need to be highly regulated and supervised by parents or caregivers. If you allow your child some limited viewing of media coverage of the war, afterwards turn the TV off, and take time to allow your child to discuss what he just saw and heard. Guide your child in making sense of it.
- ❖ Ask, "What do you suppose it looks like from the other side?" This question helps children learn about perspective. It helps them learn to see an issue from both sides and develop empathy, as well. "What do you suppose it looks like from the other side?" is a question that asks our children to shift perspective and consider how a situation looks from a different point of view. It develops their ability to see several sides of an issue simultaneously.
- ❖ When your child asks what you think the outcome will be, a safe response is, "I don't know what will happen, but I know we'll be able to handle it."

When children get scared, adults often make what they think are reassuring promises. They say, "Everything will be okay," or, "Nothing will happen to us. I can tell you that." Such promises do not tell children the truth. We do not know everything will be okay. We do not know for sure that nothing will happen to us.
- ❖ When you tell your children the truth, "I do not know what will happen, but I know we can handle it." What you are really communicating is confidence.
- ❖ Acknowledge your child's feelings with a statement like, "I understand how you could feel that way." There is strong emotion generated in this country concerning war. There are people who feel strongly that war is inevitable, while there are others who are against it. There is debate and disagreement in Congress, and even family members are often split on this issue. It is highly possible that one of your children holds beliefs about war that differ from yours. When these differences are expressed, effective parent talk would include, "I understand how you could feel that way." "I understand how you could feel that way," does not say you agree with your child. It does not say you share their beliefs or their feelings. Rather, it demonstrates and communicates understanding of how they could arrive at that conclusion. It is filled with respect for differences and honors diversity.

From Chick Moorman's e-newsletter; Chick is the author of Parent Talk: : How to Talk to Your Child in Language That Builds Self-Esteem and Encourages Responsibility, now available in paperback; Simon and Schuster, a Fireside Original. He publishes free E-newsletters for parents and educators. To get your free subscription, visit Chick Moorman's website at <http://www.chickmoorman.com/index.shtml>.

An additional Cedar Hill counselor website for parents guiding their children through crises:
 "Coping in Unsettling Times at <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/unsettlingtimes.html>

If you feel that your child is experiencing an undue amount of stress or upset and would like us to talk with him or her, please contact Joyce Schmidt or Anita Baker at 770- 962-5015. We will be glad to assist in any way we can.