

## GUIDELINES FOR HELPING CHILDREN DURING THE WAR <sup>1</sup>

- **PROTECT CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY YOUNG CHILDREN, AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE FROM EXPOSURE TO NEWS REPORTS AND FROM HEARING ADULTS TALK ABOUT THE WAR.** The more coverage children see, the more dangerous and violent the world can seem and the more information they will have to try to figure out.
- **TRUSTED ADULTS HAVE A VITAL ROLE TO PLAY HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SAFE AND SORT OUT WHAT THEY DO SEE & HEAR.** Coverage of the war so dominates the news that it's rarely possible to protect them fully from hearing about it. They need trusted adults to help them feel safe and work out their ideas about what they do hear. How you respond will influence how children feel about talking about the war and what they learn about it.
- **BASE YOUR RESPONSE ON THE AGE, UNDERSTANDING & CONCERNS OF THE CHILDREN.** While your responses need to take into account the unique ideas and responses of individual children, their age also influences how they need you to respond.
  - **YOUNG CHILDREN WON'T UNDERSTAND THE WAR AS ADULTS DO.** They will often relate what they hear to themselves and worry about their own safety. They tend to focus on one thing at a time and the most salient aspects of what they see—e.g., the bombs, explosions, and images of wounded people. Because they don't have fully logical causal thinking, it's hard for them to figure out the logic of what happened and why, or sort out what's pretend and real. They relate what they hear to what they already know which can lead to misunderstandings. "Planes in the war drop bombs, maybe the planes over my house will drop bombs too!"
  - **OLDER CHILDREN BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT UNDERLYING ISSUES ABOUT THE WAR AND POSSIBLE REAL WORLD IMPLICATIONS.** They use more accurate language and make logical causal connections, but still don't understand all the meanings or motivations and can develop misunderstandings and fears. Explore the meanings behind their language ("What did you hear about Saddam Hussein?). Then base your responses on what they seem to know and be asking. Do not rush in to provide more information than they are asking for.
- **WHEN CHILDREN ASK QUESTIONS, START BY FINDING OUT WHAT THEY KNOW.** Asking an *open-ended* question to find out more often works well. That way you can provide a response that meets individual needs. If a child asks a question about the war, you might respond by asking, "What have you heard about that?" If a child doesn't ask, you can raise the war by asking, "Have you heard anything about a place called Iraq? What did you hear?" If they say they haven't heard, you can just drop the issue.
- **ANSWER QUESTIONS AND CLEAR UP MISCONCEPTIONS THAT WORRY OR CONFUSE.** You don't need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they seem to want to know. Don't worry about giving "right answers" or if children have ideas that don't agree with yours. You will often need to help them distinguish real from pretend (like the Power Rangers) violence, help them see how they are safe despite the war. You can calmly and simply voice your feelings and concerns. End the conversation by letting them you're available to talk about things more later.
- **SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EFFORTS TO USE PLAY, ART, AND WRITING TO WORK OUT AN UNDERSTANDING OF SCARY THINGS THEY SEE AND HEAR.** Beyond conversations, it's normal for children to use play, art and writing in an ongoing way; to work out ideas and feelings. What they do can show you what they know and worry about. Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials—blocks, airplanes, emergency vehicles, miniature people, a doctor's kit, markers and paper—help children with this. [See below for more information.]
- **BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR SIGNS OF STRESS.** Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating or sleeping, or troubles with transition are signs that additional supports are

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)* by Diane E. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility & National Association for the Education of Young Children, in press).

needed. Protecting children from violent media images, maintaining routines, & providing reassurance & extra hugs help children regain equilibrium. Knowing that caring adults are there to maintain their world is usually the best antidote to worries the war can create.

- **HELP CHILDREN LEARN ALTERNATIVES TO THE HARMFUL LESSONS THEY MAY BE LEARNING ABOUT VIOLENCE AND PREJUDICE.** Talk about non-violent ways to solve conflicts in their own lives. As they get older and less egocentric, help them look at different points of view in conflicts. Help them sort out narrow and dehumanized ideas about real world and fantasy enemies. Point to positive experiences with people different from themselves. Try to complicate their thinking about these issues rather than tell them what to think.
- **DISCUSS WHAT ADULTS ARE DOING TO MAKE THE SITUATION BETTER AND WHAT CHILDREN CAN DO TO HELP.** It can help children to feel secure when they see adults working to help keep the world safe. And while they need to know that it is the adults who are working to keep them safe, taking meaningful, age-appropriate action steps themselves can help them feel more in control.
- **TALK WITH OTHER ADULTS.** Work together to support each other's efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes agreeing to protect children from unnecessary exposure to violence. Talking together can also help you meet your own personal needs in this difficult time, thereby keeping these kinds of concerns more separate from your work with children.

### **HELPING CHILDREN USE PLAY TO SAFELY WORK OUT SCARY EVENTS AND VIOLENCE\***

**When young children see and hear about the war they can become confused or frightened, or just interested in figuring out the meaning of what they saw. They often then try to bring this content into their PLAY where they can work out ideas and feelings. Here are guidelines to help you respond effectively when such play occurs.**

- Watch children as they play to learn more about what they know, are struggling to understand, and may be worried about. This will help you figure out how to respond.
- Remember: it's normal & helpful for children to bring graphic aspects of what they see & hear about the war into their play.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene and redirect it. For example, ask children, "How could people help each other?"
- Help them *expand* and develop their play so it does not just imitate the violence. Provide toys such as rescue vehicles and medical. Follow children's leads in what you do. Don't take over the play.
- After the play, talk together about the play. "Who were the bad guys in your play?" Reassure them about their safety. Answer questions simply. Clear up confusions. Teach alternatives to harmful lessons children may be learning.

### **WEB SITES with Materials to Help Educators & Parents Help Children Deal with War and Violence:**

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): [www.naeyc.org/Supporting\\_Children.htm](http://www.naeyc.org/Supporting_Children.htm)
- Public Broadcasting System has prepared, Talking with Kids about War and Violence: [www.pbs.org/parents/issuesadvice/war/](http://www.pbs.org/parents/issuesadvice/war/)
- Educators for Social Responsibility has prepared: Talking With Children About War and Violence: [www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org)
- Perdue University child development web site: [www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/](http://www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/)
- Bright Horizons: [www.bright Horizons.com/talktochildren/](http://www.bright Horizons.com/talktochildren/) [Download: *What Happened to the World? Helping Children Cope in Turbulent Times*, 2001 by Jim Greenman]
- The United Nations: <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/peace/index.asp>
- The New York University Child Study Center: [www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war\\_iraq.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war_iraq.html)
- National Association of School Psychologists: [www.nasponline.org/NEAT/unsettlingtimes.html](http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/unsettlingtimes.html)
- Wisdom from Mr. Rogers about children and war: <http://pbskids.org/rogers/parents/war.html>

\* Adapted from: Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's *Entertainment's TRUCE 2002-2003 TOY ACTION GUIDE* (TRUCE materials can be downloaded from: [www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org)). For more information on war play see: "Beyond War & Superhero Play: Meeting Children's Needs in violent Times" by D. Levin (*Young Children*, May, 2003) on the NAEYC web site-See above.