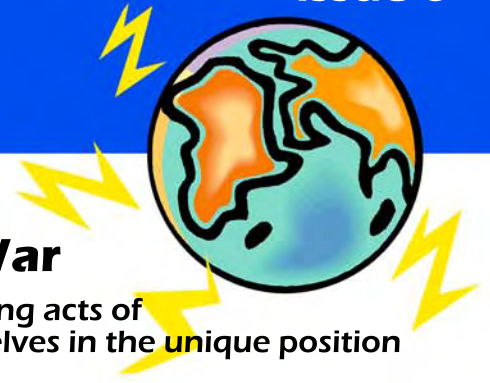




Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support



Talking to Kids About Violence, Terrorism, and War

Kids ask tough questions particularly when it comes to understanding acts of violence, terrorism, and war. Given this, educators may find themselves in the unique position of engaging with kids about these very important issues.

In their day-to-day interactions, educators have the unique opportunity to help kids understand current world events factually, to facilitate open and healthy discussions about how these events impact kids' lives, and to help kids take action to identify their own emotional and behavioral reactions to these events.

How Educators Can Offer Support

Listen to Kids

- Find out what kids are worried about, what information they have or don't have, and how they are interpreting what is being said.
- Encourage them to take the first step in sharing by asking open-ended questions.
- Offer information, clarification, and reassurance as needed.
- Don't overwhelm kids by explaining the details of what you know.
- Listen, listen and listen even more!

Ask questions

- Ask thoughtful open-ended questions, ones which can't be answered with "yes" or "no," as a good way to get a conversation started, particularly with an older child.
- Specific questions such as, "What are you afraid of?" "What bothers you most about what you are hearing?," and "How does this make you feel?" are appropriate for discussion.
- Ask clarifying questions to find out what kids mean. Remember their ideas of violence and war may be very different from yours.
- And remember to answer kids' question(s) after they have answered yours.

Acknowledge kids' feelings

- Knowing what to say is sometimes difficult. When no words come to mind, saying "This is really hard," will work.
- Try to recognize feelings underlying kids' reactions and help them identify these feelings in healthy ways through play, drawing, or words.
- When kids are upset, don't deny the seriousness of the situation.
- Be honest with kids. When appropriate, share your fears and concerns while at the same time reassuring them things will be okay.

Help kids to feel physically safe

- Help them differentiate between acts of violence, terrorism, and war and understand that precautions are being taken to keep their environment safe.
- Maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security.
- Stop kids from stereotyping people from specific backgrounds, cultures, or countries.
- Add tolerance lessons to school curriculum to prevent harassment and improve a sense of safety.
- Let those who are worried about a parent/loved one's deployment talk and share their feelings as needed. *(See Tough Topics Issue #1: Supporting Military Kids During Deployment for more information)*

Help kids maintain a sense of hope by taking action

- Help kids find their own unique ways to offer support to their schools and communities in response to incidents of violence, terrorism, and war.
- Send letters, cookies, magazines, or care packages to those in the military or local public safety positions/jobs.
- Encourage kids to write or dictate letters to legislators about their concerns and feelings.

How Educators Can Offer Support (cont.)



Expect and respond to changes in behavior

- Kids will most likely display signs of stress. Immature, aggressive, and oppositional behaviors are normal reactions to uncertainty.
- Remember it is important to maintain consistent expectations for behavior and hold kids accountable.
- Kids may pretend play or use drawing/art to express their varied emotions. Encourage positive expressions for these healthy behavioral and emotional outlets.
- Day-to-day support, consistency, and patience will help kids return to routines and their usual behavior patterns.
- For kids exhibiting signs of severe stress it is important to refer them for additional professional school/community assistance to help them cope effectively.



Coordinate between school and home

- Create a sense of collective security between school and home. This will help kids feel safe and provide a sense of protection.
- Teachers should let parents/caregivers know if kids are exhibiting stress in school. Provide helpful suggestions or information on school and community resources available for support.
- Parents/caregivers need to let school personnel know if a family member/loved one is called to active duty so schools can provide needed understanding and support.
- Invite parents/caregivers with relevant professional experience to come to school and talk about their jobs, in age-appropriate terms, and how their skills contribute to safety at home.

Tips for talking to kids about tough stuff . . .

Be aware of time and place – Kids need time, attention, and a safe environment to discuss their perceptions, understanding, fears, worries, and concerns.

Take the first step – It's often necessary for adults to initiate dialogue themselves. A good starting point is to ask kids how they think and feel about what they have heard.

Look for opportunities to start a discussion – Adults/caregivers should not be afraid to look for opportunities to discuss issues as they arise.

Focus on kids feelings and thoughts – It is important to provide kids opportunities to openly talk about their thoughts and feelings without judgment, suggestion, or lecturing about issues.

Listen to and address kids feelings – You may be surprised by kids' concerns so addressing personal fears may be necessary.

Reassure kids – Explore issues together and maintain routines and structure. Avoid "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information.

Provide facts and information – Provide kids with facts and basic information consistent with age and maturity and don't misinform them or provide a false sense of safety.

Model open discussion – Caring adults can help kids open up about their own thoughts and feelings by taking the lead and appropriately sharing their own thoughts and feelings. Be careful to monitor your own communications and avoid making generalizations which dehumanize the situation.

Provide an ongoing forum for kids to initiate discussion and ask questions – Answering questions and addressing fears doesn't happen all at once. New issues arise over time and discussions should occur on an ongoing basis as needed.

Emphasize that challenges are opportunities – Discussions about controversial issues are a good time to remind kids that challenges can also provide opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute to our world in healthy ways.

For additional copies of this publication visit: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>

For more information on this topic visit: New York University Child Study Center - <http://www.aboutourkids.org>
Educators for Social Responsibility - <http://www.esrnational.org/home.htm>
Military One Source - <http://www.militaryonesource.com>

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Information for this article adapted from: *Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (Second Edition), by New York University Child Study Center; *Talking to Children About War and Violence In The World*, by Sheldon Berman, Sam Diener, Larry Dieringer, and Linda Lantieri, Educators for Social Responsibility; *Children and Fear of War and Terrorism* by National Association of School Psychologists; and *Talking With Children About Violence and War*, Military One Source.