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America at War: Children and Parents Under Siege

By James Garbarino, PhD

As America goes to war against Iraq, parents, teachers, and other adults once again face the challenge of talking and listening to children about the difficult topics of violence, revenge, safety, danger, injury and death. But we do not have to invent the wheel; we have a lot to go on in our efforts to reassure our children. We have learned important lessons from our previous experiences with children coping with traumatic disasters--wars (e.g. the Gulf War), natural catastrophes (e.g. earth quakes), school shootings (e.g. Columbine), and other terrorist acts (e.g. 9/11 and Oklahoma City). We can draw from these experiences to offer a series of principles for adults to use in their efforts to respond to children as the images of war flood their consciousness through television, newspapers, magazines, and school-yard and family discussions. We can build upon the following conclusions drawn from past crises and challenges.

1. **Children in general will need reassurance that they and their loved ones are safe.** Young children particularly will need words and actions to communicate calm and safety rather than anxiety and fear. The evidence is clear that children cope best when adults avoid being incapacitated by fear and anxiety. Trying to maintain regular routines is important to reassure children that normal life is not over.
2. **Children already coping with loss and fear will need special reassurance.** Who are these children? They are children who have parents away from home, who are involved in a divorce, who are hospitalized, who have lost a loved one recently, or who in some other way are specially worried about issues of safety, stability, and security. Everyone connected with these "at risk" children must make special efforts to offer physical, emotional, and intellectual nurturing and support.
3. **Children will need a chance to ask their questions and get factual information to dispel misperceptions and rumors that will arise due to their immature reasoning and knowledge.** Adults should make themselves available to children to listen and then respond rather than just lecturing them on what adults think is important. Hear and see the world through the ears and eyes of children to know what to do to help them.
4. **Parents and other adults will naturally tend to become preoccupied, anxious, and sad by the disaster, but they must guard against this where children are concerned.** If adults are "psychologically unavailable" children will suffer. This is a major issue. The message to parents is clear: Don't become glued to the television and unavailable to your children when they need you most.

As they implement these general principles what else can parents do? First, they can remember that children tend to mirror the responses of key adults in their lives. Calm and confident parents and teachers tend to produce confident children who believe the world is manageable. It is essential that parents and other adults master their fear, and communicate confidence and calm to children.

Second, when communicating with children, parents and other adults should focus on positive actions that can be taken and are being taken. This includes the brave actions of adults to help victims of the tragedy, efforts of police to ensure security, and the many people who come forward to offer private help (like donating blood).

Third, parents should try to shield children from the most traumatic and dramatic images of violence and destruction. These images can set off significant psychological disturbance when they are intense and emotionally loaded. Remember that children may see things in ways that are different from adults. For example, during the Gulf War, many children were particularly disturbed by the images of the birds covered with oil from the sabotaged oil wells in Kuwait and during 9/11 some young children thought dozens of planes had crashed into American buildings because they saw the image of the Trade Tower attack over and over and thought each repetition was a separate event.

Fourth, parents and other adults should know that many children will feel a direct connection to the events that is not evident to adults. For example, during the Gulf War many kids felt personally connected to the fighting because of what to adults seemed like tangential connections-- e.g. the nephew of their music teacher at school was in the army in Saudi Arabia.

Fifth, during times of danger and crisis children need extra time and reassurance from their parents. It is tempting for adults to become glued to the television set, addicted to the news coverage. Thus, at a time when kids need extra access to their parents, those parents can become psychologically unavailable to their kids. Parents should recognize this and remember to take time out from the news to be with their children, doing things that are reassuring. These reassuring activities include a mixture of the normal routines (to show that "life goes on") and commemoration (like moments of silence and prayer and acts of service).

The march to war in Iraq has been drawn out over months, but now the rhetoric will become transformed into images of violence and destruction. Much of the initial response by parents, educators, and mental health professionals will focus on coping with the trauma and the fear of these intense images that will surely flood television screens and newspapers. But as the days pass and the immediate military actions give way to more complex issues of occupation and regime change a whole new set of issues will emerge as paramount, issues of compassion in the face of provocation?

Tibet's Dalai Lama is a world leader in teaching about compassion. One of his most important lessons is that "true compassion is not just an emotional response, but a firm commitment founded on reason." It is easy to feel hatred for our enemies and sympathy

of the victims of violence-- human decency demands it. But though it is much more difficult to feel true compassion for our enemies it is essential to achieve a lasting and just peace in the aftermath of military success. It is quite one thing to talk in public about "bringing the perpetrators to justice" and quite another to speak of exacting our revenge. It is one thing to understand the origins of terrorism and anti-American feeling and quite another to portray the struggle as simply one of "evil versus good."

Our enemies are typically caught up in their own scenarios of revenge and retaliation. Often they have experienced personal suffering or family loss, or historical victimization, and are seeking a way to give meaning to that suffering through acts of violent revenge. Mostly, they are individuals who are offered a political or ideological interpretation for their situation by their leaders. Sometimes these leaders are pathologically calculating and cold in their exploitation of their followers. Sometimes these leaders themselves are plotting revenge for what they have experienced as victims of oppression. For them, the acts they commit are not "unprovoked assaults," but rather are their own, sometimes warped version of "bringing the perpetrators to justice." We must not fear this understanding. We must not reject those who ask for understanding. We must remember the wisdom that teaches, "if you want peace work for justice." And remember what Ghandi taught when he said, "you must be the change you wish to see in the world."

The coming days and weeks will teach children and youth a great deal about justice, compassion, and revenge. They will learn lessons from what our government does on our behalf. Our goal should be to teach them at least three lessons: First, compassion and understanding are founded in strength not weakness. Let us celebrate the helpers and those who speak and act for justice and due process rather than for blood revenge. Second, protecting the stigmatized from scape goating and "guilt by association" is an important goal of public institutions in a time of national crisis. In the wake of the first Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II we rounded up Japanese-Americans and detained them as suspected enemies of the state. Third, understanding and compassion in the face of hate and fanaticism are virtues, not something to be afraid of. It is more than a matter of our good and their evil. Dehumanization is the enemy. Each individual has a story to tell, a human story. Even as we oppose, hunt for, and bring to justice to our enemies we should remember this. Perhaps we can even understand something about the conditions abroad that give rise to the fanatical hatred of America in the world that we are now going to try to transform, having undertaken a successful military strike.

Our kids are watching and listening.

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