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How parents can talk to their children about war: advice from
Cornell child-development expert James Garbarino

ITHACA, N.Y. — James Garbarino, professor of human development and co-director of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University, offers advice to parents on how they can help their children cope with violent images of war and with increased fears of terrorism.

Garbarino is an expert on child development and youth violence whose books include *No Place to Be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone* (Lexington Books, 1991) and *Parents Under Siege: Why You Are the Solution, Not the Problem, in Your Child's Life* (The Free Press, 2001).

His statement: "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. We have learned important lessons from our previous experiences with children coping with traumatic disasters – wars (the Gulf War), natural catastrophes (earthquakes), school shootings (Columbine) and terrorist acts (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 the media, schoolyard and family discussions:

"Children 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. 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.

"Children already coping with loss and fear need special reassurance. 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 are at higher risk. Everyone connected with these 'at risk' children must make special efforts to offer physical, emotional and intellectual nurturing and support.

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“Children need a chance to ask questions and get factual information. Adults should make themselves available to children to listen and then respond rather than just lecturing 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.

“Parents and other adults must guard against becoming preoccupied, anxious and sad. If adults are ‘psychologically unavailable’ children will suffer. The message to parents is clear: Don’t become glued to the television and unavailable to your children when they need you most.

“Some general guidelines: First, 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 adults 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: the actions of adults to help victims, the 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.

“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 children felt personally connected to the fighting because, for example, the nephew of a 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. Parents need to take time out from the news to be with their children, doing things that are reassuring – this should be a mixture of the normal routines and commemoration, such as moments of silence and prayer.

“The coming weeks will teach youth a great deal about justice, compassion and revenge. 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, we need to protect the stigmatized from scapegoating and ‘guilt by association.’ 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.”