

TALKING ABOUT PEACE IN TIME OF WAR: SOME GUIDELINES FOR ADULTS

by Steven Brion-Meisels

Peace Games & Center for Peaceable Schools

The ongoing realities of war and occupation in Iraq continue to haunt media and conversations. Children both at home and abroad are too painfully aware of the toll that war can bring. Older children read headlines; young children read the faces of the adults around them. Three years of war intensify concern, unease, questions and some fear. We have seen the consequences of this war even here at home: children with dead or maimed parents, an increase in fear, and in its mirror face: stereotypes about and violence against those who look like “the Enemy.” Some children know that other children their own age have been killed as a result of the fighting. Near at home or far away, war is a terrible experience for children.

How can adults help in this situation? How can we help explain, protect, heal and offer hope to children who look to us for guidance, strength and love?

Peace Games has spent the last fourteen years working with thousands of children, teachers and families who want to learn and use the skills of peacemaking. The Center for Peaceable Schools has also spent the last fourteen years helping adults promote schools and communities that are fair and peaceful. We have learned that peace is as powerful as violence in the hearts of children. All children are willing to help us to build a community that is safe and respectful; and all children have a deep hunger for authentic conversations with the adults around them. Here are ten simple guidelines that may help us talk with children in a time of war:

1. Be clear about our own values, questions, concerns and fears. Take a personal inventory and start from where we feel most clear and strong. Children can read our fears and unease on our faces and in our voices. Clarity will help us listen and speak.

2. Listen and watch before and while we speak. Children will tell us about their fears, concerns and questions – in their words and their actions. Try not to jump in with complex explanations that meet our adult needs but are not appropriate for children. Children at different ages need different kinds of information, guidance and support.

3. Understand children’s ideas and feelings before we try to change or fix them. As adults, we often feel a responsibility to protect, solve and fix. The first step is to understand; from that understanding, solutions and resolutions will become clear.

4. Keep the door open, but don’t force conversation. Give children opportunities to express themselves, even when their ideas are confused or troubling. Expression may take many forms: writing, drawing, good night talks, bedtime prayer, lunchroom conversation, tears and even anger.

5. Help students understand the realities of war from many different perspectives. In a time of war, complexity is often sacrificed to simplistic positions – whether these are political or more generally connected to stereotypes about “the Enemy.” Taking and holding multiple perspectives is extremely difficult in times of stress. However, life in a multi-ethnic democracy, as well as the healing that needs to follow war, all depend on this ability. We can support soldiers and victims as well. This is tough ground to hold, but well worth it.

6. Stand against stereotypes, bullying and harassment. War brings demonization of those who look like the Enemy. The treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and of Middle Eastern people after September 11, are both powerful examples.

7. Avoid over-exposure to media. Repeated viewing of war-related violence can traumatize children. It helps to limit exposure, and to be with children when they do see media.

8. Find concrete actions that can help. Children want to help, and like all of us, concrete actions to help can often ease our own fears. Helping can include reaching out to the victims of war, to soldiers or their families, to children and families who are targeted by ethnicity or religion, or by donations to civilian relief agencies.

9. Think preventively, maintain routines, but be alert for signs of trauma. If children around you seem especially fearful, worried or isolated, don't hesitate to use local resources. Some of these include help hotlines, pediatricians, community mental health agencies and specialists in trauma response. This is especially true in contexts where children are closely connected to the war – whether by ethnicity or because they are from military families.

10. Model peaceful resolutions to personal conflict. Children watch adults, including their civic leaders; they watch how we act even more than they listen to our words. And they watch us especially closely when we are upset, angry, frightened or stressed. It is crucial to model peaceful resolutions, if we want our children to help create a world where war is less likely.