

# Don't be afraid to talk with children about war

**My young children sometimes watch the TV news with us. How should we handle their questions about war and similar issues? Should we keep them from being exposed to this kind of news?**

That's often a parent's initial reaction. War — or any kind of violence, for that matter -- is an adult topic, and we often try to shield our children from such issues.

But, leading experts believe a balanced approach is best. In today's world, it would be impossible to keep children totally away from the news of the day. By helping your children process those messages, you can actually ease any fears they might have. By addressing their questions, you'll help them learn that it is OK to talk about topics like war and peace, and that you can help them with any confusion or fear they might be feeling.

It's never too early to talk to children about serious issues. Children of all ages can learn about war and peace in age-appropriate ways.

Still, it's not a bad idea to limit young children's exposure to television news, especially when there's a lot of footage with vivid portrayals of violence. The images and repetitive coverage of breaking news can easily become too intense. If that happens, calmly turn the TV off and ask your children about what they saw. Don't force a discussion on them, but make sure they know they can talk to you about anything they saw or heard that concerns them. A calm, brief explanation often is just what they need. They'll take your cue



from you — if you appear nervous or upset, they will be, too.

Many good sources of information are available for talking to children about war and violence. An excellent example is Purdue University Extension's "Purple Wagon" site at <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/purplewagon/>.

One of the exceptional aspects of this site is that it also discusses how to incorporate the language of peace and peacemaking with children. An analysis reported in a recent issue of the *Journal of Early Childhood Education* revealed that there are numerous resources for talking to children about war and terrorism, but few exist to help parents and teachers discuss peace and peacemaking.

The article stresses that children can learn a great deal about peace and diplomacy if parents and teachers talk about those concepts on a regular, day-to-day basis. For example, you can talk about the importance of peacemaking when helping children resolve conflicts with each other. You can point out that the skills honed in games that encourage shared decision-making and cooperation are the same skills used to generate all kinds of peace. When reading books that deal with friendship, kindness or compassion, you can talk about how those behaviors help make a more peaceful world. Helping children develop such skills is just as important as helping them deal with images of conflict they encounter.

*Family Fundamentals* is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to *Family Fundamentals*, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).



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**For the month of  
July 2008**

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