

## How Do I Talk With My Children About War and the Heightened Terror Alert?

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The starting point is to remember that most kids already know from watching TV or hearing from friends or school that terrorism is a threat and war is possible--and that people in our country and across the world have very mixed and strong feelings about this. It is important not to act like nothing is happening, but also not to cause children to feel more fearful than is realistic and helpful.

First, pay attention to how your children are getting information and what they're thinking about terrorism and war. Don't make radical changes in how you handle things like if, when, what kinds, and how much TV or movies your children are allowed to watch -- but don't let kids of any age be flooded with long periods of media reporting that might lead them to feel that something terrible already is happening. This includes if they are bystanders while you watch TV or movies.

Second, help them feel safe in ways that are age appropriate. **Preschool** or **early elementary** school kids mostly want to see that you and other adults such as childcare providers or teachers know how to make things safe for them and for their family. Talking about world events isn't helpful because they don't really have a concept of war or terrorism, and trying to explain this only causes confusion and misses the main point for them-- "Show me through your actions that I and the people I care about are dependable and safe."

Beginning at **age 7 or 8**, children tune into the larger world and ask questions about why bad things happen and why people do what they do. You can ask your children what they think about war or how they think our country should make things safe here and in the world. You can help most by reassuring your child that your family and lots of other people in our country and in the world are working hard on finding the best ways to make things safe -- and that if bad things happen, your family has a plan for being together and being safe. Tool kits such as those developed for family safety by the Red Cross can be a great source of practical examples to share with your kids (<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/familyplan.html>).

**Teenagers** are likely to be concerned about moral issues, and they want to feel that they can make their own choices and be in control. Asking their views about terrorism alerts and the news about Iraq, North Korea, and the United Nations can provide you with a chance to allay some of their worries by distinguishing facts from fears and media exaggerations. What's most important is to support and help them express their basic values--like not letting bullies hurt anyone, but also not ignoring other people's views or letting innocent people get hurt when dealing firmly with a bully.

**For children of all ages**, it is important to show that you are concerned about safety and potential dangers, but not too angry or fearful or opinionated to be able to calmly and thoughtfully handle things. This doesn't mean never getting upset with or in front of your children -- we're all human and sometimes have strong feelings -- but it does mean that the best help you can give your children is to show them through your actions that even if you're concerned or upset you still care about them and know how to help them be safe. That goes not just for major world events but also for everyday stresses.

A great source of more specific tools for talking with children about dangerous or threatening situations can be found on the website for the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence, [www.ncccev.org](http://www.ncccev.org).