

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT TERRORISM AND WAR IN IRAQ

The recent decision by the Department of Homeland Security to put the country on “orange alert” and the potential war in Iraq are difficult topics for parents to discuss with their children. We suggest that parents keep in mind that their child’s reaction may be affected by the following:

- **Children’s age.** *Preschool children* confuse facts with their fantasies and fear of danger. They do not yet have the ability to keep events in perspective and may be unable to block out troubling thoughts. They may not realize that a single incident is being rebroadcast and so may think it’s happening repeatedly and many more people are involved than is the case. *School age children* can understand the difference between fantasy and reality but may have trouble keeping them separate during times of stress and uncertainty. They may also be susceptible to rumors. They may equate a scene from a scary movie with news footage and think that the news events are worse than they really are. In addition, the graphic and immediate nature of the news makes it seem as if the conflict is close to home – perhaps around the corner. *Middle school and high school age* children may be interested and intrigued by the politics of a situation and feel a need to take a stand or action. They may show a desire to be involved in political or charitable activities related to the violent acts.
- **Children’s personality style and temperament.** Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful, and news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore, the violence and suffering depicted in the news. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports.
- **Children’s stage of development.** Children relate the news to events or issues in their own lives. *Young children* are usually concerned about separation from parents, good and bad, and fears of punishment. They may ask questions about children seen on the news who are alone and bring up issues about their own good and bad behavior. Since *middle school children* are in the midst of peer struggles and are developing a more mature outlook, they will be concerned about fairness and punishment. *Teens* consider larger issues related to ethics, politics, and even their own involvement in a potential response. Teenagers, like adults, may become reflective about life and re-examine their own priorities and interests.

As with all important discussion, the goal is to keep communication lines open. Parents must balance honesty with reassurance, keeping the following guidelines in mind:

- Tell the truth. Talking about violent acts will not increase a child’s fears; allowing children to keep scared feelings to themselves is more damaging. Although parents and teachers may be tempted to protect children from unpleasant realities, it’s not helpful to give false information or avoid discussion.

- ❑ Use language, and discuss concepts, appropriate to the child's age and interest. For example, use simple and concrete concepts about angry feelings and disobeying laws with young children. History and politics can be useful topics to discuss with older children.
- ❑ Respect a child's wish not to talk about particular issues until he or she is ready. Some children may not know how to talk about their concerns, and thus it is often helpful for parents to initiate the dialogue.
- ❑ Be available and look for opportunities to talk as they arise, for example, when watching the news together.
- ❑ Ask children what they have heard or think when starting a discussion. Refrain from lecturing or teaching about the issues until you explore what is important, confusing, or troublesome to the child.
- ❑ Be alert to nonverbal reactions, such as facial expression, posture and play behavior.
- ❑ Don't dismiss a child's fears. Children can feel embarrassed or criticized when their fears are minimized. Reassure them that their feelings are normal.
- ❑ Help children master their fears and anxieties by exploring issues and finding positive ways of coping.
- ❑ Reassure children with facts about how people are protected. For example, describe routine and special action taken by police in the community, or the President's meeting with world leaders. Reinforce individual safety measures that can be taken, for example, the importance of talking to an adult when scared or knowing parent phone numbers.
- ❑ Avoid 'what if' fears and dispel rumors by offering reliable, honest information. Let children know that many people are working together to prevent violent events from happening again.
- ❑ Maintain routines and structure, which help normalize an event, and restore a sense of safety.
- ❑ Continue being attentive to children's concerns. Answering questions and addressing fears do not necessarily happen in one sit-down session or history lesson. New issues arise and become apparent over time. Thus, discussion about terrorism and war will need to take place on an ongoing and as-needed basis.

**Written and developed by Robin Goodman, Ph.D., Anita Gurian, Ph.D. and the staff of the NYU Child Study Center**

### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties and trauma and stress related symptoms.

For more information about evaluation and treatment services, as well as mental health services offered at no cost through clinical studies, call (212) 263-6622. Examples of clinical studies at the NYU Child Study Center include an evaluation and training program to improve adolescents' interpersonal and emotion-management skills that may be disrupted following traumatic events.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on various mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or request a speaker, call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
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