

Helping Children and Youth Cope With War

Needs of Children

Acceptance

Children need your acceptance of their feelings and behaviors during this time of fear, grief, anxiety, loss, anger, and confusion. Let your children know how you feel and how you cope.

A Listener

Be a good listener and nonjudgmental in your attitudes toward children's feelings and concerns. Children will have difficulty expressing what is wrong, but you can help them name their feelings and sort out why they feel this way.

Assurance

Children need assurance of safety and security expressed honestly, realistically, and in terms they can understand. They need reassurance that they are not being abandoned and that they will be cared for by members of the family or others who love them. However, avoid being overprotective.

Comfort

Children need reassuring comfort that nothing they did or said is to blame for the war or for separation of the family or of friends.

Encouragement

Children need opportunities for venting their feelings, acting out the experience, and telling their stories. These should be done in ways that are nonde-

structive to themselves or to others.

Love and Care

Love, love, and more love. Children need to know that you care. That you are available. That your love is deeper and longer than what the war can do.

Trust

Children need to know they can trust you—your feelings, what you will do, and what they can expect of the future. Trust is always important to a child, but especially so now.

God's Love and Forgiveness

When children are loved and can trust the adults in their lives, they are freed to seek deeper answers to their faith, to share their doubts, to express their fears, to tell you of any feelings of guilt they may have. You can assure them that God's love and presence will always be with them.

Honesty

Be honest in answering children's questions. Give simple facts, without too much information, in a loving, caring atmosphere. Children cope best with what they know.

Sometimes all we can say is "I don't know" or "Let's try to find out."

Hope

Children need to know that cir-

cumstances will not always be like this, that God will always be present to guide and strengthen them, that many people are continuing to work for peace in the world.

Reality

Children may have difficulty distinguishing between fact and fantasy in watching television. Help them know what is real and what is a story.

Self-esteem

When the world around them has fallen apart, children need to have a sense of worth, of accomplishment, and a sense of being in control.

Stability

When children's lives have been turned upside down, put

some semblance of stability back by keeping routines such as times for going to bed, what to do at mealtimes, friends who come to visit, and expectations for school attendance and homework, as close to normal as possible.

Support

Children need your support when they see hurtful or disturbing things on television or when other children make disparaging remarks that hurt.

Understanding

Children need the calm presence of and contact with family members or adult caregivers who understand their feelings and needs. Your role will be to interpret, clarify, and respond to the children's questions. Avoid withholding important information Children can tell when something is not right.

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Ways Children Respond During War

Children may respond:

Physically

- to the sights of the war as seen through television, newspaper, and magazines
- to being uprooted from their homes and families and everything that is familiar
- to being surrounded by many strangers
- to the absence of family members at home or friends at church or school

Emotionally

- by becoming hyperactive, overly busy, active, or restless as they struggle with the crisis
- by becoming egocentric, feeling they are the only ones affected and thinking only of self, for example, "Will a bomb hit me?"
- by being fearful of injury or death to a loved one in war,

of being separated from the family, or of being afraid they will be left alone

- by becoming friendly and glad to be alive
- by becoming very talkative and wanting to share their experiences with everyone
- by overly responding to their emotions of anger by hitting, kicking, or throwing objects. They may be upset more easily or worry unnecessarily about where they will live or what will happen to them.

Psychologically

- by needing to tell their own story over and over
- by becoming dependent, reverting to previous younger behaviors and expecting the caregiver or parent to do everything for them
- by feeling guilt and seeking theological explanations.

They are not responsible.

God did not cause this war to happen.

- by role reversal or transference. In cases of death or separation, the child may pretend to be the missing family member and to fulfill that person's role in the family.
- by having a higher than normal anxiety and stress level
- by being afraid to go to bed at night or to go to sleep for fear of something happening
- by coping through denial that certain feelings are present, or by suppressing that this is actually happening

Socially

- by becoming shy and withdrawn from both adults and peers
- by being overly fearful of strangers, especially if they are in uniform
- by clinging to parents for

fear that one or both of them will leave. They may refuse to go to school or church.

- by becoming upset more easily, shown by crying, fighting, or exhibiting other forms of disruptive behavior

Spiritually

- by asking questions about God. Did God cause the war? Why doesn't God make it stop? Does God want us to kill all of the people there? If daddy or mommy kills someone, will God forgive him or her?
- by doubting if God is real. Why did God let this happen? Why didn't God answer my prayers for peace?
- by lacking trust in God. Will God take good care of mommy or daddy? Will God care for us? Does God love the people there? If daddy or mommy is killed, who will care for me?
- by questioning God's presence with us. If God is here, why do I feel so bad? Why didn't God keep the war from happening?
- When the war is over, what will happen then? ☒

Ways to Help Children Express Feelings

Water Play

Playing in a tub of warm water stimulates inhibited children and soothes explosive children. A warm bath may help relieve stress.

Play Dough

Play dough can be worked or reworked to express feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety.

Painting

Painting can help children express moods of joy, sorrow, fear, or anger. Children paint what they feel or what matters in their lives. Finger painting is a good medium for such expression.

Puzzles

Puzzles can be a way children create order out of chaos. Children whose lives have become disoriented, confused, or disrupted will often feel better after putting a puzzle together.

Toys

Toys can help children relive a bad experience or play out their feelings. Often the victim becomes the rescuer, the one in control.

Puppets

The use of puppets enables children to become talkative and to reenact an unhappy experience. Puppets are good listeners.

Books

Children often lack the vocabulary to express their feelings. A book can help define a child's understanding of war, death, separation, or fear.

Cuddly Toys

Giving love to a cuddly toy may be sharing the love a child needs. Sitting quietly with a cuddly toy can soothe an angry or fearful child.

Music

Music allows an emotional release and the free expression of feelings through songs, creative movement, and games.

Play

Active play allows for release of emotional energy in a socially approved way. Quiet games may be comforting to a child who chooses to be alone.

Storytelling

Storytelling, drama, and role-plays are ways to help children tell their stories to act out feelings and to resolve conflicts.

Adapted from training leaflet, Cooperative Disaster Child Care Program, General Board, Church of the Brethren.

What Parents or Guardians Can Do

- Help your children, especially young children, distinguish between the reality of television coverage of the war and the fantasy of movies.
- Limit the time you permit your children to watch the war news. Watch the news with them and encourage them to talk about what you saw. Correct any misunderstandings and answer any questions.
- Keep routines and expectations of behavior as close to normal as possible to give children stability in their daily life.
- Be honest in answering children's questions. Keep answers simple, without giving more information than the child needs at the time.
- Be honest with your own feelings. Discuss these with your children or help them know that you have some of the same feelings they have.
- Assure them of your love. Reassure them that you will keep them safe and



will be there to care for them. If one or both parents are away, assure the child of the parents' love too.

- Help children realize that they are not responsible for what has happened.
- Provide comfort in ways that feel reassuring to you

and to your children.

- Watch for signs for maladjustment to the crisis. Spend extra time putting children to bed. Leave the night light on, if needed. Give opportunity for them to ask questions, express concerns, or share their feelings before going to sleep.

- Listen to what the children say, how they say it, and what they play. Is there evidence of fear, anxiety, or insecurity? Talk about and clarify any feelings shown in conversations or play.

- Have quiet family times together. Spend time sharing concerns, expressing feelings, feeling God's reassuring presence, and expressing your needs and concerns to God.

- Assure children that God listens to our prayers and answers them. That God continues to love us. That God is a forgiving God. That God knows our needs. That God cares how they feel, think, and act. That God is always with us and will guide us and strengthen us to meet whatever lies ahead.

- Find a father or mother substitute for the parent or parents who are away. This could be friends, relatives, or church members.

- Find time for yourself. You need time to cope with your responsibilities, to work through your own emotions, and to be with other adults. You will need your own quiet time to renew your emotional and spiritual needs.

- Plan for the family to attend church and Sunday school regularly to feel the support and strength of this community of believers.

- If a child's adjustment does not return to normal after a sufficient time, consider talking with someone (minister, school counselor, or professional counselor) who understands children and their needs. ☒

Effects of Prolonged Stress

If the war continues, some children may be affected by "accumulated stress." Children have been under a heavy burden with circumstances they cannot understand or do anything about. How they respond over a long period will depend on their perception of the war, their own coping systems, and ways parents or other adults model their reactions to war.

Be aware of symptoms of cumulative stress:

- daydreaming or lack of concentration
- loss of appetite
- drop in school performance
- lack of interest in friends or favorite activities
- changes in personality, such as aggression, irritability, or excessive fears

Helping Youth Think About War

By Michael R. Russell

Most American teenagers have thought of war as something that happened long ago and/or far away—that is, until recently. The consequences of war in Iraq will be keenly felt here at home, and high school and college students will be forced to think about their own participation in the armed services.

For many youth, this will be the first time to consider the religious and ethical issues involved in military service. The basic question is whether some things are worth killing people for—and if so, what kinds of things and what sorts of people.

Christian Thought on War in the Past

In the history of Christian thinking about war there have been differences of opinion. Pacifism is the belief that love requires reconciliation with one's enemies and refusal to participate in warfare. The Christians of the first two centuries after Jesus' resurrection apparently were pacifists. There is no record of Christians serving in military units until about A.D. 170.

After the Emperor Constantine became a Christian in the fourth century, many Christians came to believe that some wars are just wars and that Christians may participate in them. Over time, a theory of just war came into being. According to this theory, wars are just if (1) they are ordered by legally recognized authorities; (2) they are fought for just values and ideals; (3) they are intended to bring about good or to punish evil; and (4) they



are carried out by proper means. This theory of war was acceptable to Christians for many centuries.

Questions About War Today

When we think about the just war theory today, questions arise that might not have been important to Christians in the past. The just war theory developed in a time when weapons were much less destructive than they are now. Could any nuclear war be said to bring about good or to punish evil in a redemptive way? Modern weapons, even used on a small scale, are so technologically sophisticated that it is hard to tell the difference between pressing buttons to kill people and pressing buttons to win a video game. Can this kind of

nameless, faceless destruction ever be justified? And finally, who determines what the ideals and values are for which young women and men go into war? Are values things people can vote about in the same way they vote about congress members? These are complex questions, but they are not simply matters for debate. The answers can determine that some people will die and that other people will kill them.

What Does the Church Think Today?

Questions about participation in military service are questions of conscience. The United Methodist Church through its theological statements and Social Principles has attempted to offer guidance on these ques-

tions to members and attendees. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2000, paragraph 164-G states, "We support and extend the ministry of the Church to those persons who conscientiously oppose all war, or any particular war, and who therefore refuse to serve in the armed forces or to cooperate with systems of military conscription. We also support and extend the Church's ministry to those persons who conscientiously choose to serve in the armed forces or to accept alternative service." To act conscientiously is to be governed by one's conscience. Such action involves careful and thorough consideration of the issues involved in the decision.

As Christians, we commit ourselves to a life informed by Christian values. And as Christians we can draw upon our religious community to help us understand how to live out our convictions. Youth should talk to their parents, to a minister, and to their youth leaders or counselors. They need to be

honest about their beliefs, fears, and values. If possible, they should talk with someone who has served in the military and also with someone who has chosen not to serve. Youth should be as candid as possible; it is their life they are talking about.

Conscientious Objection

Persons who refuses for reasons of conscience to serve in the armed services are called a *conscientious objector* or *CO*. We are privileged to live in a nation that recognizes the right to refuse on moral, ethical, or religious grounds to take up arms. However, if after prayer and reflection one does decide to become a CO, there are procedures that must be followed. The single most important

thing to do is to start a file that documents the CO's intent. The file should include letters from a pastor, from youth counselors, from teachers, and from other adults with whom COs have discussed their ideals and beliefs. These people need not be in agreement with the COs; the point is to document their convictions, to show that the beliefs are held with sincerity and integrity.

If a draft is instituted and a person is called up for service, that person will have less than ten days to apply for CO status. The induction notice will give information on how to apply. The application form can be picked up at any post office; it has three or four questions. These questions must be answered carefully and at length, a page or two for each answer, and copies should be made and placed in the applicant's personal file. These answers and a copy of the applicant's entire file should be sent to the relevant local draft board for review. This board will decide on the case; the applicant will be notified when and where to appear before the board. A copy of the file should be taken to this meeting, and a friend or advisor may be allowed to appear before the board with the applicant. If the request for CO status is denied, further appeal can be made.

If the need for a draft does arise, there may be changes in procedure. The most important thing for a youth who conscientiously objects to war to do is to begin to establish a documentary file as soon as possible, a file based on personal beliefs and values. United Methodists should talk with a minister about registering as a CO with the General Board of Church and Society. A copy of this registration should be placed in the file. ☒

What Families Can Do

- Encourage your children to express their emotions through the medium of play and conversation.
- Join a support group for yourself and find one for your children.
- Work for peace in the midst of war to offer hope to the family that this may never happen again.
- Send letters or e-mail or videos to soldiers overseas or to family members and friends. Before mailing letters and packages, check with your post office about recommendations for labeling.
- Pray for the service personnel and their families.
- Pray for the enemy, especially the innocent victims of the war (women, children, elderly). These are God's children and loved by God.
- Pray for the leaders of the world as they make important decisions.
- Have daily family devotions.
- Do things together as a family, such as visits to the zoo, a park, the beach, or the children's museum, or go to a children's play or musical.
- Encourage children to be involved in clubs or groups related to a special interest, such as scouting or a creative arts group.
- Become a support group for another family. You will help them, and in turn you will be helped in the healing of your own trauma.
- Enjoy reading new books that are fun, humorous, light, and nonviolent.
- Encourage children to play outdoors, to engage in athletics, band, or other group activities. ☒

What Churches Can Do

- Put up a peace pole. Use a square pole and write "peace" on each side in a different language. Use the pole for special prayer services and as a reminder to continue working for peace. Do not take it down until there is peace in the world.
- Pray for service personnel and their families.
- Engage in Bible study and reflection on the meaning of war and God's will for people.
- Offer your facilities for or begin your church's ecumenical support group.
- Provide baby sitting for young children of military families or offer scholarships for your weekday programs.
- Adopt a family for special holidays.
- Encourage men and women to become an "adoptive father" or "adoptive mother" to a child whose parent or parents are overseas.
- Send letters, cards, e-mails, or videos to military personnel and their families.
- Prepare care packages to send to military personnel and their families. Check with your post office for advice on labeling mail and packages.
- Establish a food pantry, clothes closet, or furniture storage for military families on the move if there is a facility near your church.
- Work for peace. Appoint a peace coordinator in your church and obtain some of the resources on the resource list to begin your planning. Keep alert to developing needs in the community.
- Provide access to your church library for members of the support group or military families.
- Find members who can donate time and expertise to start your own clinic to provide medical, legal, or counseling services to military families who are living on reduced incomes.
- Schedule regular prayer vigils for military personnel and for peace.
- Provide volunteers to staff a hotline for support groups.
- Open your recreational hall or begin new programming for youth and children as a physical outlet for the emotions.
- Contact the Red Cross for emerging needs that the church can respond to. ☒

Resources

Check your public library and church library for these books and pamphlets for reading, thought, and discussion.

For Children

Adversity

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, Judith Viorst (Ages 4-8)

Assurance

Guess How Much I Love You, Sam McBratney (Preschool)

The Kissing Hand, Audrey Penn and Ruth Harper (Ages 3-8)

Mama, Do You Love Me? Barbara M. Joose (Ages 3-8)

The Runaway Bunny, Margaret Wise Brown (Ages 4-6)
I Promise I'll Find You, Heather P. Ward (Ages 4-8)

Feelings

The Hating Book, Charlotte Zolotow (Ages 4-9)

I Was So Mad, Norma Simon (Ages 4-8)

Sometimes I'm Afraid, The Menniger Clinic (All Ages)

Cultural Diversity

In God's Name, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (All Ages)

God's Paintbrush, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso (All Ages)

Children Just Like Me, Susan Elizabeth Copley (Ages 8-12)

Children from Australia to Zimbabwe: A Photographic Journey Around the World, Maya Ajmera, Anna Rhesa Versula, and Marian Wright Edelman (Ages 8-12)

Violence

A Terrible Thing Happened: A Story for Children Who Have Witnessed Violence or Trauma, American Psychological Association

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss, Michaelene Mundy (All Ages)

Bad Stuff in the News Book, Marc Gellman and Tom Hartman

Bad Stuff in the News Leader's Guide, Marcia Stoner with Marc Gellman and Tom Hartman

Death

The 10th Good Thing About Barney, Judith Viorst (Ages 4-8)

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf, Leo F. Buscaglia (Ages 4-8)

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Ages 4-8)

Everett Anderson's Goodbye, Lucille Clifton (Ages 5-12)

For Parents and Teachers

Explaining Death to Children, Earl A. Gollman

Children and Trauma: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, Cynthia Monahan

Make-Believe: Games and Activities for Imaginative Play, Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer

The Scared Child: Helping Kids Overcome Traumatic Events, Barbara A. Brooks et al.

Working with Traumatized Children: A Handbook for Healing, Kathryn Brohl

Children Grieve, Too: Helping Children Cope with Grief, Joy Johnson and Marvin Johnson

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child, The Dougy Center for the Grieving Child

All About Teaching Peace, Elaine Ward

Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflection on Shalom, Walter Brueggemann

Christian Parenting for Peace and Justice, James McGinnis and Kathleen McGinnis

Relating to People of Other Religions: What Every Christian Needs to Know, M. Thomas Thangaraj

When Grief Breaks Your Heart, James W. Moore

Getting through Grief, Ronald H. Sunderland

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold Kushner

Good Grief, Granger E. Westberg

FaithHome for Parents, Abingdon Press

For Youth

Questions Senior Highs Ask, unit on other religions (X722330 or download at <http://www.cokesbury.com/digitalstore/product.asp?file-name=92QSA08E>)

To the Point: Religions (0687437024)

To the Point: Violence (0687437695)

Counseling Troubled Teens (0687082367)

Reel to Real, volume 1, no. 1, *Movie Fly Away Home* (0687980747)

LinC issue Good Grief (originally released 2/6/2000) (<http://www.cokesbury.com/digitalstore/product.asp?file-name=LC020600>)

YouthSearch: Death (0687005973)

Questions Senior Highs Ask, unit on death. (<http://www.cokesbury.com/digitalstore/product.asp?file-name=9262QSA4>)

For Adult Groups

Relating to People of Other Religions, Thomas Thangaraj (0687051398)

When Grief Breaks Your Heart, James W. Moore (0687007917)

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold Kushner (0380603926)

Good Grief, Granger Westberg (0800611144)

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