

Talking to Your Children About Armed Conflict

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Whenever stories about armed conflict, terrorism, or the possibility of war emerge on television or in the news, it is important to consider the possible reactions of children and youth. Such topics quickly become a focus for daily discussions among people. It is especially important to think of children's reactions when the issues directly relate to family life, such as the deployment of a parent due to military service.

Many children do not understand the political or military issues underlying such events, but seeing other children on the news often captures their attention. After watching military families say good-bye on the national news, for example, children in general may wonder if their parents will have to leave also. Children who have one or both parents in the military may be faced with issues of separation and uncertainty. Older children might struggle with the different opinions concerning issues involving armed conflict or war. They may have questions concerning what should be done about them on a national or even a global level.

Recommendations for Parents in General

- Most importantly, **listen** and **talk to your children**. Let your children know this is a topic that they can talk about with you. Ask questions so your children can direct the conversation and so you can get a feeling for their thoughts and concerns. This can allow you to clarify some confusion or comfort any worries. Also, remember this is simply the beginning and many more discussions will likely follow as events unfold or develop.
- Use stories and art work to enhance conversations about these difficult topics. Many children are able to express themselves through drawings or comparisons with characters in a story. It is often easier and less threatening to children to talk about someone else instead of their own feelings.
- Avoid talking about enemies. It might be more helpful to talk about "bad or harmful actions" instead of "bad or evil people." Using this approach can be helpful in assisting children to understand that people can choose their behavior. Therefore, if a person has done something "bad" in the past, they can choose to do something "good" in the present or future. This helps children to avoid broad stereotypes about those involved in armed conflict or war.
- Reassure your children of their safety. Explain what you as a parent and others will do to keep children safe. Explain how far away the military actions taken will probably be (use a map for illustration). However, do not ignore the terror related to, and the terrible things that will happen in a war. Studies indicate that children care about people in their own country, as well as other countries. Support this caring attitude.



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Recommendations for Military Families

- If one of your family members is deployed, **try to keep your children's schedule as normal as possible.** This will be hard at times because your spouse probably was involved in many activities, such as watching kids or driving them to appointments. However, keeping family routines consistent reinforces a child's sense of security.
- **Monitor the amount of TV news you watch.** You know best how you and your children react to the news, especially when outcomes and topics discussed are uncertain or worrisome. If you feel your anxiety level rising too high, turn off the TV and radio and rely instead on information that is distributed through the military chain of command.
- **Develop and use your support network.** Before or after a deployment occurs, be sure to develop a support network that includes family, friends, neighbors and all the resources the military can offer. These relationships will allow you to ask for help when you need it.

Resources for Military Families

The Department of Defense has created a web site that contains information for military parents and individuals who work with military families at:

<http://mfrc.calib.com/healthyparenting>

This site is easy to navigate and provides information for parents with younger as well as older children. Furthermore, there are additional resources that can be used within your own communities. Please use these resources wisely so support resources are not overwhelmed.

Military Family Support Line: 1-(800)-242-4940 or
in Bismarck, (701)-333-2058

Family Support Center – Air Force:

Grand Forks: (701)-747-6435
Minot: (701)-723-4728

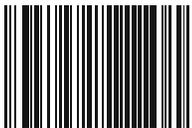
Family Readiness Office for Air Guard, Fargo:
(701)-451-2112

Regional Human Service Centers:

Bismarck: (701)-328-8888
Devils Lake: (701)-665-2200
Dickinson: (701)-227-7500
Fargo: (701)-298-4500
Grand Forks: (701)-795-3000
Jamestown: (701)-253-6300
Minot: (701)-857-8500
Williston: (701)-774-4600

Participate in family support group meetings and use the support system available through the military if possible. If there are more serious concerns, seek help through counseling resources based either on the installation or in the private sector. For instance, the Family Therapy Center at North Dakota State University in Fargo can provide such services (701)-231-8534.

For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu



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