

# Strategies to Help Children Cope With Fear and Anxiety During Wartime



By Karen Stephens

At some time in life, all children must learn to face, manage, and overcome fear and anxiety. Sadly, for today's generation, that time has come sooner rather than later. With terrorism and war news marching daily into homes, childhood fears are a reasonable, logical reaction.

Children facing fear should never feel isolated and alone. Instead, they need bolstering support from parents and trusted caregivers. Only with that support will they learn how to cope in times of stress and crisis. By working through fears, children will gradually learn to maintain the emotional stability that leads to confidence and self-assurance.

With that end in mind, following are tips for helping children maneuver these troubling times.

## Notice Play Themes

It's not unusual for children to *act out* what bothers them in order to make sense of information and to manage their fears. So keep a close eye on details of their play themes. It can give you topics to address later during quiet time together.

In light of current war news, it's likely children will engage in more war or superhero play than usual. Such play gives children some sense of control over events. Take note of unusual play actions and ask questions as appropriate. By asking questions, you can learn what your child has seen or imagined, and what he or she is thinking.

As chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction are referred to daily, children may pretend to "spray" the enemy. Or they may pretend to take "dead soldiers" to hospitals. Use such play to begin an exploratory discussion: "Can you tell me what your soldiers are doing? Why are they doing that?"

During these times, take the opportunity to tell children facts on what has or has not happened. Discussions related to play themes also give you an opportunity to casually share your personal values, beliefs, and opinions about world events. Don't lecture to children, but find ways to share ideas during play. Take care to gear comments to children's ages and interests.

## Avoid Long Separations

Avoid traveling away from children for long periods when they are especially fearful. If business travel isn't avoidable, make an extra effort to stay in touch daily. The reassuring sound of your voice means a lot to children.

## Cue Into Behavior Changes

Children often don't tell us the minute something scares them. They harbor fearful feelings until they can't contain or control them. Behavior changes, such as sleep disturbances or increased separation anxiety, are often first clues to kids' fears. An alert eye can detect and address fears early, when they're more manageable.

## Be Patient and Approachable

Provide some one-on-one time so your child can openly ask about his fears. If questions don't surface, there's another way to root out the problem. If you suspect a fear, broach the subject yourself. The trick is to do so without planting fears that weren't there in the first place! (There's always a trick, isn't there?)

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their fear.”

Statements invite dialogue, while point-blank, rapid-fire questions often make kids feel defensive or backed into a corner. To trigger communication, casually mention you're willing to listen if they have a concern. If you don't get a response, describe behavior. Suppose your child never wants to leave your side — even to potty. You might say, "I notice lately that when you use the bathroom you leave the door open. I was wondering why?" Or if your child begins crying on the way to child care, you can say, "You never used to cry about child care. If something is bothering you, let me know. I may not be able to change it, but I'll listen."

By making non-threatening comments, your child learns you're approachable. And don't give up too easily. It's not unusual for kids to guard worries. Kids know fears are considered "babyish," especially if they've been teased by older siblings. Be patient during discussions and allow kids the time they need to open up.

### **Extend Empathy**

When children share a fear — whether it seems logical or not — be respectful, accepting, and understanding. Encourage your child to describe her feelings or those she has for children in war zones. Respond with vocabulary that sorts out emotions: "Dreaming of people coming to fight is scary. I'd be nervous going to sleep, too."

Listening to fears is a simple way to show support as you get a clearer picture of what your child is thinking and experiencing. Express empathy by telling your child it's okay to be afraid. If it's true, admit to having the same fear when you were young — or even as an adult.

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### **Be Accepting and Reassuring**

Children may express fears so they can be reminded that we'll love and protect them whenever they need us. It never hurts to let them know how serious you are about keeping them safe.

And don't worry — reassurance doesn't mean you'll reinforce fears. Accept children's feeling as real and genuine. Reassure them that times will get better; that they won't always have the fear hanging over their head.

### **Give Children Time to Overcome Fears**

Help kids take small steps to gradually master their fears. For instance, a small night-light in a room takes the scary edge off of darkness. Don't push children to ignore or lie about their fears. Comments such as, "Be a big boy now," or "Keep a stiff upper lip" are roadblocks to the coping process.

### **Spend Extra Quality Time Together**

Turn off the television and play more cooperative board games so conversation can happen. Go to the park for a good run or visit the zoo or children's museum to relieve children's stress. Creating a close, joyful family life is a great antidote to fear and despair.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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