

## **Responding to the Emotional Needs of Children As War Looms**

**by Jim Kendall , LCSW**

Talk and pictures of war is everywhere. Bombs exploding, pictures of destruction and faces of frightened people fill the media. Operation Iraqi Freedom is on our minds.

War enters our living rooms and bedrooms as adults are glued to the TV. These are emotionally charged incidents for those children. For children whose relatives may be on the front line, the meaning is even more devastating. Children get their cues on how to react by noting how adults respond. They sense the seriousness of a situation when an adult reacts with alarm, fear, or anxiety. Children may also respond to their imagination and perceptions of an event. Children may be afraid that they might be killed or injured; that something might happen to their homes or schools; and that the events may be happening in their community. They try to make sense of the event in relation to themselves. For a small child, they may still have "magical thinking" and believe that it happened in response to their actions or thoughts. We try to provide "normalization" and support for our children but they sense this is a time of uncertainty and concern.

Kids need to learn as they grow up that the world can be unpredictable and that bad events can happen to good people. Bad luck exists, but doesn't dominate life. The lessons children learn regarding psychological responses to tragedies can stimulate their emotional growth for future events. It remains a stressful time for many. Some will have behavioral changes including outbursts, anger, tearfulness, sleep disturbances, anxiety and fears. Others may seem to be unaffected.

Children and teens are resilient and can deal with the emotional impact these world events, especially if we as adults can help guide them through it. Remember to take in to account the developmental age of the child and give age-appropriate information. Often times the child will let you know the amount of information they want or need by asking questions. If a child, teen, or adult continues to have difficulty dealing with the event, don't hesitate to consider talking with counselors or other professionals who can assist these children in making sense of their world and feelings.

### **TIPS**

- Limit the obsessive focus on the moment to moment news on TV. Take a break and do other activities.
- Let the child or teen tell you about their feelings and the way they experience the world situation. Try to understand their interpretation of the events. Discuss how you as a parent (adult) view the situation and what you thought and how you felt.
- Children are afraid of things happening in their circle of influence; therefore a realistic explanation about the location of the war and impact on their safety can be helpful.
- Kids of all ages need reassurance. Let them know that they are safe. Their lives can and will return to normal. Explain concrete information as to how these

events will impact the child and the family today and for the next few days ,weeks or months.

- Adolescents may react intermittently with responsibility and logic (adult mode) and also by acting out to establish the boundaries. They often rely on their peer group for support.
- Try to re-establish a daily routine whenever possible. This reduces anxiety for children.
- Recognize the individual ways a child or teen expresses their reaction to a trauma (clinging to adults, anxiety, fears, sadness, anger, isolation, avoidance, etc.) and respond accordingly.
- Children may be particularly prone to the development of psychosomatic complaints such as headaches and stomach pains. Trips to the school nurse or pediatrician may increase temporarily.
- Teens may have the tendency to have exaggerated acting out behavior in order to avoid dealing with their own feelings. Truancy, sexual indiscretion, substance abuse and rebellion may increase in response to heightened environmental stimulation.
- Teens process their emotional responses with peers. Adults can facilitate this by offering a safe environment for teens to congregate and deal with their feelings as a peer group.
- Teens may overreact or under-react to the situation since they often have little previous experience with which to compare traumas.