

HELPING CHILDREN COPE IN UNSETTLING TIMES (including war and terrorism)

ADVICE FOR SCHOOLS

Adults need to help children feel safe at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place. Teachers and parents can help children to understand current events and how to handle their emotional reactions.

The degree to which children are affected will depend on personal circumstances. Children who are most vulnerable include those who have:

- Suffered a personal loss.
- Had firsthand experience of war or terrorist acts.
- Parents in the military and on active service.
- Parents who have fought in past conflicts.

The school's role in helping anxious and troubled pupils is to provide emotional and academic support within a caring, reliable and predictable environment.

Emotional Responses

Although these will vary in nature and severity from child to child, the following are typical reactions:

- Fear – is likely to be the predominate reaction, for themselves and their family, particularly if parents are in the military.
- Loss of control – military actions are something over which children, and most adults, have no control. Lack of control can be overwhelming and confusing. Children may grasp at any control that they have including refusing to cooperate, go to school, part with favourite toys or leave their parents.
- Anger – is a common reaction often directed at those closest to them including parents and friends. Some children may show anger towards parents who are in the military – duty and patriotism are abstract concepts, especially for younger children who are experiencing the concrete reality of separation from a loved one.
- Loss of stability – war on military deployment disrupts routines and is unsettling. Children can feel insecure when their usual schedules and activities are disrupted increasing their level of stress and need for reassurance.
- Isolation – children who have a parent in the military who do not live near a military base and children who have accompanied a remaining parent back home may feel isolated. The latter will also have experienced the loss of familiar faces and surroundings.

- Confusion – about terrorists attacks or war, further dangers and when the violence will stop. Some children may also have difficulty understanding the difference between violence as entertainment and the real events taking place on the news. Separating the realities of war from film and TV fantasy may require adult help.

What can teachers do to help?

For most children, adults can provide adequate support through the following actions:

- Remain calm and reassuring – children will take their cues from the key adults in their lives.
- Acknowledge and normalise their feelings – allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage any questions they may have about events. Listen and empathise. Let them know that others are feeling the same way and that their reactions are normal and expected.
- Maintain normal routines and expectations – these help to provide a sense of stability and security. Some immature, aggressive, oppositional behaviours are normal reactions to stress and uncertainty. It is important to maintain consistent expectations for behaviour, children need to know that the same rules still apply.
- Emphasise people's resilience – focus on children's competencies in terms of their daily life and at other difficult times. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened, worried or upset.
- Be a good listener and observer – let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not anxious or focused on current events, do not dwell on them, but be available to answer questions to the best of your ability and in age-appropriate terms. Young children, however, may not be able to express themselves verbally so pay attention to changes in their behaviour, play or social interactions.
- Stop bullying or harassment immediately – remind children not to pass judgment on groups of people or other people's ideas just because they seem different. Finding ways to address the intolerance that leads to conflict and aggression can be one way to help children regain a sense of control over events.
- Encourage children to talk to you or another caring adult – emphasise that you are there to help and that they should let an adult know if they or a friend feels overwhelmed for any reason.
- Do something positive to help others in need – making a positive contribution to the community or others more closely affected by events can help people feel more in control.
- Communicate with school/home – teachers and parents should share any concerns they may have about a child, especially if a family member is on active duty.

- Take care of your own needs – talk to colleagues, friends and family, take time to deal with your own feelings, everyone feels stressed at times of crisis and uncertainty.

Potential reactions to trauma

Most children and young people will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of teachers, parents and other caring adults. However, some may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Adults should consider seeking professional advice if children exhibit significant changes in behaviour or any of the following reactions over an extended period of time:

- Pre-schoolers – thumb sucking, bed wetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behaviour, withdrawal from friends and routines.
- School children – irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.
- Adolescents – sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behaviour and poor concentration.

And finally, the natural support systems of family, school and community are the most important factors in maintaining a child's sense of normality at times of anxiety and stress.

(This advice has been adapted from information on the National Association of School Psychologists website – www.nasponline.org)

Further advice and information on dealing with bereavement and loss in schools can be found in the Somerset Educational Psychology Service booklet:

“Critical Incidents in Schools – Advice and information for school staff”

**Somerset Educational Psychology Service
September 2010**