

Helping Children Cope with the Disturbing Images From Iraq

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Your **Mind** on **Media**
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With the new horrible images of prisoner abuse and torture and the decapitation of Nicholas Berg coming daily out of Iraq, parents are again wondering how they should handle the situation vis-a-vis their children. Many children are understandably shocked and disturbed by these images, and parents are curious about how to handle this issue in their homes. The advice I give here is similar to the advice I gave after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the anthrax scares, and last year's invasion of Iraq. I have updated it somewhat, and have added in advice that is specific to these new issues.

Here's my advice in a nutshell:

Limit children's exposure to TV: How TV communicates about these events is horrifying for children. Make interpersonal communication the main way they learn about what has happened and about the ongoing events that unfold as the world responds to these stories.

Be there for your children: Give your children extra attention and warmth at this time. Answer their questions; be as reassuring as possible; your calming presence and caring attention are what they need most. For children under 7 or 8, see my book, *Teddy's TV Troubles*.

Recognize that children of different ages have different needs at this time. In my parenting book, *"Mommy, I'm Scared,"* I explain how children of different ages see and interpret television differently, and I discuss why this fact is important in understanding how to keep them healthy and happy in these media-obsessed times. I am summarizing some of my points here, paying specific attention to different age groups.

How Different Age Groups Are Affected:

Our Youngest Children (Birth through 6 years): For this group, "seeing is believing" - vivid visual images and startling, emotional sounds affect them the most. To them, whatever they see on television is real, and it is happening while they are watching. What will upset them the most are visual images of people suffering or being attacked or mistreated, and crying or screaming victims or witnesses. And if the images are replayed again and again, the events will seem to be happening again and again. Preschoolers will be less likely to be upset by a building collapse or by the commentary of announcers. They are unlikely to grasp the enormity of the issue. But gruesome images and horrified emotional expressions will unsettle them the most. The fearful reactions of their loved ones will also disturb them. They may be quite disturbed by visual images of men with hoods over their heads being tortured, or images of naked, hooded men being mocked by others.

Elementary School Children (Age 7 to 12): These children will have a more concrete understanding of what war means. They will understand that innocent people (like Nick Berg) were killed and they will be curious about the bizarre images of prisoner abuse. They are unlikely to understand the nature of the terrorist threat and the difficult issues surrounding our response, but they will be most concerned about their own and their family's current and continuing safety.

Teenagers and Beyond (age 13 and up): These children will be horrified by the same things as younger children, but in addition, they will be anxious about what this war means for the future in terms of our personal safety and our day-to-day lives. They will be seeking answers to the question of "why?" and will also be searching for solutions that will permit us to return to the lives we knew before September 11th and before the war in Iraq. They may begin to be worried about the possibility that the draft will be reinstated.

Advice On TV Exposure:

Limit exposure to TV: This means any channel that provides updates on the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism generally. Try to prevent your children from stumbling into something horrifying. Don't leave the TV on . . . Find a way to get your own updates without subjecting your

children to the news. You yourself will cope better if you limit your own exposure, and if you are obsessing about the unfolding events, your children will sense it and become more anxious themselves.

Advice on Talking to Children about Their Fears:

Children will undoubtedly have worried questions about these images and events, and you may be at a loss as to how to handle them. Keep in mind that they are turning to you mainly for reassurance. You of course should not lie to them, but you can be most helpful by finding the most reassuring way to phrase your answers. Your conversations about the events should be tailored to the age and comprehension capabilities of your child. As I argued in "*Mommy, I'm Scared*," what works best for children in situations like this is the calm, unequivocal, limited truth. Say just enough so your response makes sense to them. Don't feel that you have to inform them about all the other things that might have happened or that still could happen.

For children under the age of 7 or 8, what you say isn't as important as your calm warmth and attention. Acknowledge their fears and then get involved in some other activities. This is why I wrote the children's book *Teddy's TV Troubles*. It tells the story of a little bear who was scared by something on TV and shows what he and his mother did to calm him down and make him feel better. It provides an appealing framework for parents to help their children cope.

Don't give them any more than they're asking for or more than they need to know. Stress, in any way that you can, the fact that they and your family and friends are safe now; that there are good reasons why what happened before won't happen again (for example, now that we know about the prisoner abuse, it's being investigated and halted); why something like that wouldn't happen near you; for young children, as well, don't feel you need to fully explain the images of sexual abuse -- you can say they were trying to "embarrass" these people, rather than fully explaining the meaning of these photos. Find any kind of reassuring "spin" you can (but don't lie). Even if you yourself are horrified or worried, there is no advantage in having your child traumatized, miserable, and unable to sleep. There are no protective measures your child can take -- what your child needs most is a way to feel secure.

As children reach their teen years, you can have more meaningful conversations with them about these issues. Let them know that you're there to discuss their fears and anxieties with them. Urge them to moderate their exposure to the horrible images for their own mental health. If they seem eager to look at the image of the beheading on the web, try to explain to them how powerful and disturbing these types of images are and how indelible the memories of such images become.

Advice to Schools:

Whatever you do, don't bring breaking news of events like this into the classroom even though it may be tempting to have your students "live history." This happened in many schools during the Columbine tragedy, and it happened with 9/11 as well. Children need not and should not be dragged through unfolding cataclysmic events in "real time." Television, with its emphasis on speed and sensationalism, will provide the worst-case scenario for informing children. If it seems appropriate or necessary to provide children with updates or announcements, these should be presented in words and in a calm, non-sensational manner that satisfies their information needs without adding to the trauma.

Advice to the Media:

Television: Make exposure to the upsetting content predictable. If you must interrupt scheduled programming with breaking news, don't do it with sirens and screams and vivid visual images; give parents time to change the channel, mute the sound, or get the children out of the room.

Restrain your instinct to repeat and repeat those same sensational images -- none of us need to see them again. Realize that for young children, you are showing them what they will experience as yet another attack. Even non-news programming has at times repeated such disturbing images.

Newspapers : Keep your images of bloodied or abused victims and off the front (or back) page! Young children are much more likely to see them on the outside, and readers can easily look inside if they want to see them.

Parents: Speak out and let the media know how you feel about the coverage. The media, of course, want the widest possible audience for their advertisers, but they are also sensitive to complaints.

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