

Stressed-Out Kids

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When I was asked by a national radio show to talk about how to help children cope with war, I felt the interview would be simply an extended version of my everyday conversations. Living in a military town, we knew many people who had been deployed. This war was personal. Samantha's dad, Jimmy's brother, Karla's uncle, Debra's son and others known by name were in the fight.

Hopefully, I was able to offer the listeners of that show a number of helpful suggestions. But when the interview ended, I hung up the phone and began to think about all the topics I'd been asked to discuss on radio and television in the last five years—teen violence, bullies, eating disorders, AIDS, HIV, date rape, terrorism and now war, to name only a few. And I began to compare the stresses kids have today to those of my own youth. Yes, I had anxieties and even experienced the Vietnam War, but I never lived my days worried about my safety.

Today, American children are exposed to distress at much earlier ages. Because of technology and the media, visual images of disaster, war and criminal activity can be seen daily in households. Parents have to discuss what to do in case of a school shooting, how to handle a bully that may come after you with a weapon, and what to do if your friend becomes suicidal or is slowly killing herself with an eating disorder.

Children and teens are growing up in stressful times, and they worry. They may lose sleep, complain of headaches or stomachaches, become irritable, withdraw and want to stay

home, have changes in appetite or even fear going to school. They need our help to deal with the stresses of our day.

The way you help depends on their developmental age. Preschoolers are typically unaware of the violence in the world. They should be sheltered from news reports that describe it because they can't make sense of them.

Younger children need reassurance—not reassurance that everything will be fine, but reassurance that you, as a parent, are doing everything you can to protect them. Remember, younger kids often confuse reality with fantasy and may ask outlandish questions such as, “Is that plane going to bomb our house?”

Older children need a chance to share their feelings about world events. Allow them to talk about their views and insecurities, again providing reassurance. These are teachable moments in which you propose faith and values as responses to stress and anxiety. Talk about the bad actions of people versus bad people. Explain how our choices impact others.

Teens often will take a position on war and terrorism. Their position may not be the same as yours, but help them to think critically. Integrate biblical principles into the discussion.

For example, you could open up a discussion about President Bush's decision to go after Saddam Hussein with the question: “If there were a bully in your school who pushed and shoved you on a regular basis, what would you do? Would you turn the other cheek as Jesus suggests in Matthew, or would you defend yourself and put a stop to the behavior as David did when he fought Goliath?”

Let your teen struggle with that question. Search the Scriptures for answers. Talk about the importance of seeking the mind of Christ and being led by His Spirit.

Carry on routines. Find time to play and relax together. Allow children to share their worries regularly. Come together as a family. Children feel secure when they are with people they love and trust.

For children of all ages, limit their exposure to violent images. We know from several studies that watching violence creates anxiety and aggression in children. It also creates fear.

And of course, the most important thing you can do is pray with and for your children. Memorize Scripture. This activity provides material for discussion at the same time that it places the Word of God in our hearts.

Also, encourage your children to pray for those who are defending our freedom and for innocent people who are victims. Remind them that God is always in control and that He will help us in times of trouble when we call upon Him (see Ps. 91:15).

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