

# Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World

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Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of war and crisis. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds and in their hearts, and give them the best of our understanding and our guidance. Educators for Social Responsibility has prepared this guide for adults who are concerned about how to communicate with young people about difficult issues in the world.

This guide explores some of the questions that parents and teachers ask most frequently—in particular about ways to have discussions about events such as war, terrorism, and military involvement in distant lands. As we reach out to help the young people we serve, we're also aware that we as adults are experiencing the same range of emotions our students are experiencing. In order to maintain our ability to effectively serve children, we need to remind ourselves to build periods of nourishment and [renewal](#) into our own lives. We hope this guide helps you listen and respond to the concerns of the children you care about.

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### **1. How much media coverage of tragedies or warfare is healthy for students to watch?**

It depends on the age and maturity of the children. Parents may decide that some shows and topics are inappropriate. However, if children are going to watch programs about the war, we recommend that a parent or caregiver watch with them. Afterwards, talking together about reactions to the coverage and feelings about the event in general can help children make sense of what they are hearing and seeing. There is ample research which says that viewing television coverage of violent or tragic events is correlated with increased chances of post-traumatic symptomology later, so it is important to limit the amount of television coverage children watch, regardless of age. It is especially important to limit young children's exposure to graphic images of violence.

### **2. How can I judge if a child is ready to talk about difficult events?**

Most children from age four to five and above would appreciate talking with adults they trust. In the media there is daily discussion of difficult topics, and it is likely that children know about them. However, it is also quite likely that they have some confusion about the facts and the magnitude of the danger they personally face. Younger children often combine facts and connect them to their own experiences in surprising ways that can increase their sense of fear, believing for example, "Planes have

bombs on TV, so the planes over my house have bombs too." They often have mistaken information, questions, and some strong feelings. Often children are hesitant to share their questions and fears with adults. For this reason, we recommend that adults create space for children to share their concerns.

### **3. How do I open up the subject with children?**

The key word here is listen. Most experts agree that it is best not to open up a conversation with children by giving them a lecture—even an informal, introductory lecture—on the particular tragedy that is on the news. Don't burden children with information for which they may not be ready. The best approach is to listen carefully to children's spontaneous questions and comments, and then respond to them in an appropriate, supportive way. Let children's concerns, in their own words, guide the direction and depth of the discussion. If they don't bring the subject up, you can invite conversation by asking a question. You might ask younger children, for example, "Have you heard anything about a country called Iraq?"

### **4. Won't it just scare children more if we talk about it?**

No, not if you listen to children and respond in a supportive, sensitive way to what you hear. No matter how frightening some feelings are, it is far more frightening to think that no one is willing to talk about them. If we

communicate by our silence that this—or any other subject—is too scary or upsetting to talk about, then the children, who depend on us, may experience the added fear that we are not able to take care of them. Young children especially need to feel secure in the knowledge that the adults in their lives can manage difficult topics and deep feelings and are available to help them do the same.

**5. What if children never bring up the subject? Should I just wait or is there something I can do?**

Some children may not bring things up because they are genuinely not concerned; others may never bring up the subject even if it's on their minds; some are afraid of upsetting their parents or teachers by bringing it up; while others are too overwhelmed by their feelings to open up a discussion. As adults we can at least try to assess how children are feeling in order to decide whether a discussion is appropriate.

Children who are troubled but have difficulty talking about their concerns may need special attention. It can be helpful if we gently start the conversation ourselves. You might ask opening questions such as, "How do you feel about what's happening in the world?" Later, you might want to ask, "What are you or your friends thinking and talking about in terms of the world situation?" No matter what their response is, we need to listen—carefully and with care—to what our children have to say.

**6. It feels so passive just to listen. Is it appropriate to tell children how I feel?**

There are several pitfalls in sharing feelings about violent events outright with children. A serious one is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and fears for them, rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have. Sometimes, children feel that they need to take care of us and our feelings. Another is that we might cut off the expression of what's on their minds and in their hearts as we get wrapped up in expressing what's on ours, and thus miss hearing what children want to tell us. We might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying our need to "give" children something rather than satisfying their need to be heard and understood. We wouldn't want to communicate the message that what they have to say is not important.

This is not to say, however, that we need to be passive—good listening is a very active process. After we've listened carefully, it may then be appropriate for us to respond in ways that provide assurance that the adults in their lives care and are trying to promote safety, security, and peace. We may also want to say that we share some of the same feelings and remind children that we'll be together during these difficult times.

## **7. How can I listen to children in the most effective and helpful way?**

As you listen to children, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from their point of view. Don't make judgments about what they say, no matter how silly or illogical it may sound to you at first. If you don't understand something, ask them to explain it. Show your respect for them and their ideas.

As parents, teachers, and caregivers know, children are not always able to express what they mean or what they feel, and what they say doesn't always mean the same thing for them as it does for adults. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what's going on behind the initial words they utter. Comments such as, "That's interesting, can you tell me more about that?" or, "What do you mean by...?" or, "How long have you been feeling...?" are examples of ways to elicit more information from children without judging what they are saying as right or wrong.

If they seem to be struggling to make something clear, it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarize and focus their concerns. For example, you might say, "Are you saying you're scared that the Iraqi government might attack us?" Or, "So, you're worried about the children who live in cities being bombed?" Or, "You've heard Saddam Hussein did horrible things to the Iraqi people and you want to know if that's true?"

Clarifying questions and statements help children sort out their ideas and feelings and show them they've been heard and respected without interfering with their thinking process.

Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may not be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages—facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, posture, tone of voice, or others—which indicate that strong emotions may be present.

It is reassuring to children to have adults acknowledge that their feelings are okay. A comment such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I feel sad too," tells a child that the feelings are not only normal and understandable, but that you have similar feelings as well and are still able to cope.

## **8. What if children don't want to talk about these issues?**

If you ask good opening questions and the child clearly isn't interested in talking about certain issues, then don't push. Again, it's important for us to communicate to children our respect for how they feel. This extends to respecting their right not to talk about something they don't feel ready to talk about. There are some children who simply aren't concerned about these things and there's no reason to force them into this awareness. For other children, sharing what they feel may be more easily expressed in another medium besides talking, for example through play or drawings.

Some children are reluctant to talk about violent events because their feelings of fear and confusion overwhelm them, or because they don't feel confident that adults will be able to hear their concerns and respond to them in a way that makes sense. Adolescents may be more reluctant to talk if they perceive their parents and/or teachers having different opinions. They may think that the adults in their lives will try to impose their beliefs on them. These young people need to know that the doors to communication are open when they are ready. One way to let them know this might be to say something like, "Are you and your friends talking about what is happening in Iraq? I'd be really interested in hearing about what you think. Let me know if you want to talk."

Be aware of signals young children send out through their play, their drawing and writing, their spontaneous conversation, and other ways they might communicate about their preoccupations. Young children often use their play instead of words to work out what they are hearing, and observing them as they play can give us important clues about their thoughts and feelings. Especially with young children, be aware of other signs that could mean they are stressed, such as: irritability, sleep disturbances, separation problems, and regression in recent developmental accomplishments. Similarly, if you observe children drawing one violent scene after another, overhear conversations where they seem unnaturally concerned with violence and hopelessness, or if your children seem in any way preoccupied with images of destruction, then it is appropriate for you

to let them know that you have noticed this and that you wonder if they could tell you more about it. Use your own judgment, and listen attentively to what they have to say.

Once you have really listened to what is on a child's mind and in their heart, you will be in a far better position to respond to them.

### **9. How do I deal with the different emotions that children may have about these issues?**

It is natural and healthy for there to be a wide range of emotions about any particular conflict. Some children will be sad, anxious, and even fearful for their own family's safety; others will be confused about how to make sense of the events; and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions—fear, sorrow, and worry, for example. Some will respond with anger at the Iraqi and/or U.S. Governments' actions leading up to or during the war.

Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings. The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary school children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary and middle school children it will be issues of fairness and care for

others. For adolescents it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation.

Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide reassurance by making specific plans with children around what we would need to do in the event of an emergency. In other cases, our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

Some students might be excited by reported military victories, or upset about reported defeats. Caution about euphoria or dejection in the early stages of battles or wars is warranted, as a cursory glance at the history of surprise reversals in warfare will attest. Helping students to question simplistic win-lose thinking is also important (please see question #25), because reality is often more complicated than that. Older students might want to read [President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address](#), for example, as he tried to reach out, even on the verge of victory, to bind up the wounds of war.

Other students might become fascinated with the technical capabilities of military hardware. It's useful to promote explorations of scientific and engineering principles, while also complicating students' thinking by encouraging students to comprehend the [human consequences of violence](#) for all sides.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure children, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much you and they care about others and the world around them. You can express that it is this caring that makes you feel more hopeful and gives you strength.

In order to be there for our children, it can also be useful to find ways to talk in depth with, and receive support from, other adults in our lives. Teachers in some schools after September 11, 2001, for example, formed school-staff discussion groups in order to listen to and support each other.

Students will also have a wide range of opinions about the war. Please see section three of this guide ([questions 20](#) and above) for suggestions about promoting constructive dialogues.

### **10. After I have listened to children's concerns, how do I respond? Is it helpful to give them facts?**

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what's on their minds.

Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and help them distinguish fantasy from reality. When we have

listened to what they think and feel, we can gently correct their misinformation by making factual statements. For example, in response to the commonly held belief among young students that tall buildings fell down many times in multiple locations on September 11, 2001, we could inform them, “Even though you might have seen the World Trade Center fall down many times as they replay pictures of those same two buildings falling down over and over again on TV, it happened once on that one day in New York City.”

We can also answer children’s direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. A child who asks, “What are smart bombs?” or, “What is a terrorist?” deserves a factual answer. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent—underlying confusions or unexpressed anxiety—then ask an open-ended question to determine what may be going on for them and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Give children a chance to respond to each of your comments before saying more. Follow the lead of children’s questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one’s own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child’s questions.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not always clear and straightforward. Some are much deeper. When children ask such questions as, “How come we have war?” or, “What will happen when the war is over?” we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another.

We might ask, “What do you think?” It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict.

Finally, we can give our children the opportunity to continue to explore their questions and to learn from this conflict. Children often use play to further explore and work out what they are hearing in regard to a violent situation. For instance, war play is a common phenomenon, particularly among young boys. Some schools decide that war play is not appropriate on school grounds. If your school does ban war play, it is important to find other avenues where children know it is okay to work out what they hear with the support of adults, for instance through drawings and discussions. If children are engaging in war play, we can utilize it as an opportunity to learn what they’re thinking and discuss what the play means to them. Some children get stuck on imitating the same violent actions over and over. For play to meet children’s needs, it needs to evolve and become more complicated. Providing open-ended props like clay, rescue equipment, and toy medical supplies, can help young people make this transition.

For older children and adolescents, conflicts such as the war in Iraq, and the events on and after September 11, 2001, raise important issues about the roots of violence, the ways conflicts are best resolved, and how to increase security. For adolescents concerned about their own potential involvement in war, it raises questions about their own options

and choices. These are important issues for young people to talk about and think through with adults they trust.

At the same time, young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution and developing concrete skills to resolve conflict nonviolently in their own lives. This is an opportunity for them to explore alternative means of resolving conflicts and ways that, even when a conflict becomes violent, people continue to work toward its resolution. In addition, it would be valuable for them to think about how they may pursue a constructive response that promotes peace and security in their schools and neighborhoods.

### **11. I have strong opinions about what is happening. Is it useful to share my beliefs with children?**

Because the opinions of adults in a child's life carry such weight (especially with younger children), we recommend that you focus on what the child is thinking and feeling. Stating an opinion, especially in the early stages of discussion, can block open communication by preventing children, who might hold different opinions, from openly sharing and discussing them for fear of disapproval. It might also shift a child's attention to thinking that they may need to take care of your feelings rather than exploring their own. Since most older children are aware of their parents' opinions anyway, it is perhaps more important to help children to think critically about many points of view and

arrive at their own conclusions.

However, it is important to communicate to children the value of hearing other points of view and respecting the people who hold them. Helping children understand that the issue of violence, for example, is a complex one allows them to feel that their opinions can make a contribution to our understanding of the issue. We recommend that you stress the importance of their examining a variety of points of view, as well as your own, and their learning to appreciate what each has to offer.

Difference of opinion can be very healthy, and something that both adults and children can learn from. Often, however, these differences degenerate into unproductive arguments where both the adult and child become entrenched in their positions. Constructive dialogue begins with a good deal of listening and a sincere effort to understand both what the other person is saying and the beliefs that underly their point of view. It is important to avoid statements that categorically dismiss an adolescent's opinions such as, "When you grow up you'll understand." or, "You don't know what you're talking about." Instead, restate what the child has said to make sure you understand it. Listen carefully to the child's point of view, and ask questions to help him or her clarify it. Rather than immediately countering statements with which you disagree, you can ask questions that can help you better understand the child's perspective.

There are respectful ways of disagreeing which you can model by stating your

disagreements in the form of, ‘I experience things differently. I think that...’ rather than telling the child that he or she is wrong. The goal, after all, is not to dictate opinions to children, but rather to help them engage in critical thinking and to make their own reasoned decisions about controversial issues. Finally, help your child understand that a person’s opinions can change, and that a decision reached today might be different tomorrow with the addition of new ideas and information.

### **12. How can I talk with children if I feel that my own grasp of the facts and issues is inadequate?**

Fortunately, we don’t need to be experts or know all the facts about something in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers. When older children ask for information we don’t have, it is fine to say something like, ‘That’s an interesting question, and I don’t know the answer. How can we find that out together?’ The process of figuring out where to get the information, and going through the steps to obtain it, can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child’s questions don’t lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, ‘I don’t know the answer to that and I’m not sure

anyone does. I do know, however, that many thoughtful people throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue.’

### **13. How can I reassure and comfort children when I honestly don’t feel hopeful myself?**

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group isn’t practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

### **14. What can I say that is both comforting and reassuring?**

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to listen calmly, even to concerns which might seem unrealistic, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they are not alone with their concerns.

You can also help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer. The most effective antidote to anxiety, fear, or powerlessness is action. Engage them in a conversation about the way in which their school is working to make it a more peaceful place and explore ways in which they might be an active part of the effort to create a peaceful community in their school, home, and neighborhood. You can also engage them in [writing letters](#) to members of Congress, the local newspaper, or governments around the world to express their feelings and views on the war.

### **15. What if a child is fascinated or excited by a violent or tragic event?**

Due to the way these events are often portrayed in the media, it is natural for some children to be fascinated and, at times, excited by them. Preadolescent boys, especially, may have a fascination with some of the images of violence. The reporting of violence sometimes takes on the tone of a sports event, and the language used in public discourse is often either highly sanitized or inflammatory. Young children are often drawn to things that look exciting, powerful, and dramatic. As they do, they focus on what they see, without necessarily focusing on how it may affect themselves or others. As a result, some children may not be sensitive to the human suffering created by wars, or the sadness and anxiety other children

experience as a result. We need to help students explore multiple perspectives about issues—including ones that may not be broadcast as frequently.

Some students, encouraged by video-game-like footage they may see on TV, might have difficulty distinguishing between the fantasy of video games and the realities of war. We can ask students to compare and contrast violence as portrayed in some video games and the hardships of war. If students are having trouble understanding these distinctions, you might want to share age-appropriate [poetry](#), short stories, novels, artworks, songs, or autobiographies which depict war in greater complexity.

There are age appropriate ways to help children see the human and environmental consequences for all sides, as well as the complexity of the issues involved. Inquiry-based lessons and media-literacy approaches are especially useful when teaching these skills (see also [question #22](#)).

### **16. What if children seem to have excessive fears? (nightmares, obsession with violence and weapons, etc.)**

Deep feelings of sadness, anxiety, and confusion are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death, suffering, and the reasons that people resort to violence. Children with “extreme” concerns need to be listened to and understood the same way that children with “normal” concerns do. It may be more difficult for the adults closest to them to help them put their

strong feelings into words. When children are troubled and their parents and teachers have difficulty helping them sort the trouble out—no matter what the issue—it may make sense to seek the help of a mental health practitioner. The problem may be as simple as untangling a particularly frightening bit of misinformation. But, if you have doubts about what a child's fears mean, or how to help the child deal with them, we strongly encourage you to consult a counselor or other professional trained in this area.

You will want to watch for signs of significant increases in anxiety, distraction, fear, or hopelessness, and know where you can go to access additional mental health services in your area. Support groups are often formed for adults and children whose family members are involved in a crisis. Sometimes one crisis is a trigger that reminds children of another crisis closer to home. Your school may need to form a group with children who are most at-risk for developing post-traumatic stress symptomology. Again, there are many professionals who may be available to help parents, teachers, and children.

### **17. How can I reassure children and help allay their fears?**

Many children might be afraid that the Iraqi government, or terrorists, will attack the U.S. These fears can be magnified for those children who: hear or watch a lot of news coverage about these issues; are most directly impacted by the attacks of September 11, 2001; live near military bases; or have relatives

in the military or emergency service professions. If students raise these fears, we can tell students that there are many people working to keep our schools and neighborhoods safe.

If children ask questions that reflect this fear or if their behavior suggests that they have such concerns (e.g., they get anxious when a plane flies overhead), it is important to give them a direct and reassuring answer. How specific you make your reply will depend on the child's age. If younger children in the U.S. ask, "Will Iraq bomb our neighborhood?" we can tell students there are many people working to keep our schools and neighborhoods safe, and that the Iraqi military does not have planes that can reach us in the U.S. If older students ask about whether terrorists will attack, we can acknowledge that the threat of terrorist attacks here is a scary possibility, while explaining that the chances of our area being attacked are low. Again, we can reiterate that many adults are working to prevent such attacks from happening. Once we give our answer, we should wait to see how the children respond in order to decide if we have said enough or if more information is needed.

For many children, fear and anxiety will come and go, but for those children who have family and close friends involved in or living near the conflict, the anxiety and fear are more constant. There are some special things that can be done to help these students. First, we need to identify who they are and inform guidance counselors of their potential needs. Second, it may be helpful to have

a support group for these students so that they can talk about their specific concerns. Third, in classroom conversations about the war, we need to pay special attention to affirming the courage and commitment of their relatives and separating that from domestic differences of opinion about the issues related to the war. Students who are most directly affected can be especially valuable contributors to class conversations, adding an important human dimension to the conflict.

Entire classes may want to write or make pictures for the relatives of students who are most directly affected, and this can help those students feel supported by their classmates. For students with relatives in the military, you can find additional ideas about how to keep parents, schools, and children in touch with each other at the website of the [Military Child Education Coalition](#).

For students whose relatives are in danger, there is no easy way to allay their fears. However, it is important to maintain the normal family or classroom routines and schedules as much as possible, and to listen in the supportive ways we've suggested in this guide.

Validate children's feelings and keep the channels of communication open. It will also help to provide reassurance through positive and hopeful comments such as, "People are working very hard to help all the families involved in these events." Finally, when you are talking with children, give them known details about the whereabouts and activities of the friend or family member. Continue

to make the person real and present for them by talking about him or her.

Some children may have to cope with the death of their relative or friend. It is appropriate for the school and the class to grieve with the student in both formal and informal ways. If this occurs it would be helpful to find people in your area who are experienced in dealing with grief to help the school respond with sensitivity and care. For more ideas about dealing with crises in schools, please see the website of the [Crisis Management Institute](#), the [About Our Kids](#) site at NYU, and the multi-lingual materials available through the website of the [National Association of School Psychologists](#). We have links to additional material on [our own site](#) as well.

### **18. How do I deal with the rage some young people express towards the perpetrators of violence?**

Feeling angry is one very appropriate response when reacting to horrible events, and it's important to acknowledge and recognize those feelings. Often, there are many other feelings hiding beneath the surface of what can be seen as an "anger iceberg," including fear, disgust, shock, sadness, helplessness, guilt, and despair. It can be helpful to explore with students what they are feeling by guessing what's important to them, asking, for example, "Are you saying you want to be able to do something for people who were injured?" Remember to ask open-ended questions, such as, "What is upsetting you the most?"

**19. I'm concerned about the articulation of revenge and retaliation fantasies. How can I respond?**

During wars some students become focused on the excitement of, “smashing the enemy,” and begin to make revenge a more prominent theme of their writing, drawing, and play. Acknowledge that many people, including many adults, share those thoughts. When children see adults, particularly adults in power, modeling these kinds of responses, they often follow suit. Empathizing with the underlying feelings and helping students clarify what is important to them (that justice be done, for example) can be helpful.

It's also important to explore the consequences of retaliation. We can help young people discuss what they perceive happening after someone retaliates in interpersonal conflicts. Often, the other person gets angrier and chooses to strike back, escalating the situation. We can ask students how they usually respond when someone does something mean to them. ESR offers additional lesson plans to help teach about [war](#) and [conflict escalation](#).

It's confusing to some students that some adults tell them to, “use their words,” in order to prevent fights, while governmental leaders sometimes resort to war. Responding to observations like these can be difficult, and we might respond differently depending on our own point of view and the age of the child. You might explain that many adults are working to prevent conflicts

from escalating into war. You could mention that some adults agree and some disagree with governments' decisions to wage war. Many adults believe that some international conflicts require the use of military force. Whether analyzing issues at the personal or global level, we can engage students in discussions about ethical questions such as, “What measures should we take to prevent or resolve serious conflicts and should we use violent force or nonviolent action to achieve our goals?” See also our list of [Essential Questions about the War with Iraq](#).

Remind students that many people around the world are working to see that justice is done. However, people have many different perspectives about how best to make this happen.

**20. I am hearing an increase in prejudiced comments. How can I intervene?**

Point out that rumors and misinformation often emerge during a crisis. Rumors which falsely generalize about the behavior of an entire group of people can be particularly dangerous. Talking with students about the damage rumors cause in their own lives can help students understand the need to identify rumors for what they are.

Parents and schools can help prevent the emergence of stereotyping and the victimization of any group. Children who share a culture with the people of the Middle East, children whose parents come from countries whose governments are currently unpopular with the U.S.

government (such as France), and children whose points of view diverge from that of the majority, may be at increased risk of becoming the targets of taunts, bullying, and harassment.

For example, according to the FBI, [reported hate crimes](#) against Arab-Americans in 2001 in the U.S. [increased 1600%](#) (increased sixteen times) over the number reported in 2000, while [other hate crimes](#) continued at a high rate. The [National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium](#) reported that 27% of hate crimes reported to them after September 11, 2001 were committed in schools.

In times of war, some people dehumanize the residents of countries whose governments are in conflict with their government. Sometimes this extends to people who came from, or whose relatives emigrated from, that region. The internment of Japanese-Americans in the U.S. during World War II is one example of this phenomenon. One way we might present this to students would be by sharing an analogy. If one student in a school steals a cookie, it would be a mistake to call everyone who goes to that school a thief. Similarly, we can't blame everyone who lives in a region for crimes allegedly committed by a few individuals.

Because some people have little knowledge of, or exposure to, Southwest Asia and Northern Africa, other than stereotypes, they may inappropriately lump together the diverse cultures of the Middle East. Sometimes, especially when responding with fear and anger to the actions of some individuals or

governments in a region, people make suggestions which exhibit a failure to acknowledge that human suffering and loss of life is involved, such as, "We should blow the whole country off the map," or, "Let's just wipe them all out." We can acknowledge the feelings which motivate these statements, while striving to complicate the students' understanding of the ethical issues involved.

We can help children avoid creating a one-dimensional image of any group of people as simply, "the enemy." One way to prevent stereotypical thinking is to teach about the processes by which prejudices develop. When we clearly communicate our rejection of ethnic and religious slurs, taunts, jokes, and physical abuse, we reinforce and model how to interrupt prejudice and promote respect for all.

Schools can help young people understand the potential for abuse, and that harassment is not acceptable or legal. This may mean directly intervening to stop bullying or harassment. Even more important, schools can demonstrate and reinforce ways that people can listen to each other, learn from each other, support each other, and respect each other's backgrounds and perspectives.

After September 11, 2001, some school officials, partially out of fear for the safety of students, asked Muslim girls to remove their hijabs (head scarves) and Sikh boys to remove their turbans, thus potentially violating their civil rights. Some parents, afraid for their children's

safety, made the same request. While this may seem to be an easy solution, it is more important for schools to send a strong message to all students that differences in culture and religion are welcomed in the school. It's the responsibility of everyone in the school community to create a safe learning environment for each other by speaking up if anyone is being targeted by bigotry. When teachers address these issues and there are only a few members of a particular group in the room, it's important to avoid singling out students in the minority, so the lessons can be framed in terms, for example, of respecting everyone's religious practices and beliefs. ESR also offers a range of lessons to help schools [counter bias and discrimination](#).

By helping young people understand the human and environmental consequences of wars and violent conflicts for all sides, and the complexity of various issues, young people can become more sensitive to other people's feelings and points of view. We can help them recognize that people in and from the Middle East are human beings who, like people all over the world, experience joy and pain, have differences of opinion, and deserve respect. Children can also begin to learn about the complexities of Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, Bahá'í, and Christian history as well as about the many cultures of the Middle East in general.

## **21. How can I approach teaching about war and other violence in the world?**

When teaching about war and other violence in the world, it is best to follow a model of instruction built on inquiry. Begin by framing some essential questions, then assess what students know, and follow their questions. You can begin with three basic questions: What do students know?; What do they think they know?; and What are their questions?

You might map this information using a [concept web](#). In order to build on this prior knowledge, have them engage in research and bring to class the information that they discover. Although this may not take you methodically through the material, it will raise and address the issues that are most salient for your students while maintaining their sense of engagement. Helping students to be conscious about the ideas, values, and evidence upon which they make their own decisions is the best preparation for democratic participation as adults.

This is also an opportunity to teach an understanding of ethical dilemmas. There are numerous ethical issues associated with the current world situation. Helping to illuminate these and engaging students in dialogue about what ethical standards are appropriate for judging our actions and the actions of others can be a particularly important learning experience.

These questions can be a starting point for exploring ethical standards of behavior:

1. Does the action inflict more or less harm on all or some groups affected by the action?
2. Does the action force anyone to engage in immoral or illegal acts?
3. Does the action contribute to greater safety and security in the short-run and/or the long-run?
4. Do the goals and desired outcomes of an action justify the means?
5. Does what is right, fair, and moral for one group or government conflict with what is right, fair, and moral for another group?
6. Is the desired action safe, smart, legal, and equitable for all/some groups?
7. Does the desired action meet important interests of all groups involved in the situation?

## **22. Should I teach elementary school children about the war and if so, how should I approach it?**

Elementary-aged children, especially those in upper elementary schools, are aware of war and other global conflicts. There are many ways in which teachers can deal constructively with teaching about war and other controversial issues without either frightening or propagandizing children. See ESR's [Teaching Elementary Children about Controversial Issues](#), including our [Guidelines for Discussing Controversial Issues](#) in elementary classrooms. One

approach is called [The Ten-Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues](#). It is a version of the inquiry approach outlined above age-appropriate for elementary schools.

In The Ten-Point Model, students begin by pooling what they know and what they think they know about an issue. They also develop a list of things about which they want to find out more. This is followed by an information-gathering period during which students search for answers to the questions, particularly by interviewing parents, family members, and friends. Next, using the information they have collected, they correct any misinformation previously listed and develop more questions. This process continues until the students use their collected information in some type of culminating activity.

## **23. Are there moral and civic principles that I can use to help frame discussion with my students?**

U.S. public schools have a civic responsibility to teach about the principles and ideals of the U.S. Constitution, such as liberty and equality. Within this framework, teachers can encourage students to explore and discuss how best to apply these principles in any given crisis or with a public policy issue. They can discuss what sorts of civic obligations and virtues are needed to sustain these values. Teachers can make clear that there is often disagreement about how best to apply those principles. And they can help students explore how well, historically, the U.S. government and

citizens have lived up to these ideals and principles. Teachers can also use international documents to provide a framework for student discussion. For example, the [U.N. Declaration of Human Rights](#) can help students draw upon principles and ideas that have been agreed upon by many countries around the globe, including the U.S.

#### **24. Are there [essential questions](#) I can use to frame teaching and learning?**

One challenge for teachers is to develop essential or overarching questions to help frame inquiry and discussion. Good questions help students to develop critical thinking skills and forge a deeper understanding of issues like this one. They also help students to think about and grapple with some of the complex issues provoked by a specific conflict or war.

In the current crisis, it is important to help students explore answers to questions about: a) the dynamics and history of the Middle East and our relationship with countries there; b) national and international responses to threats to world order; c) the ethical issues surrounding international crises; and d) the U.S. role in the world. See our list of [Essential Questions about the War with Iraq](#) (see Appendix).

#### **25. How do I best guide discussions of complex and controversial issues?**

Three factors make teaching complex, current issues particularly challenging. The first is that there is no one best solution. The second is that we will have

to be patient as events unfold and information becomes available. The third is that in periods of conflict, tolerance for opinions that challenge mainstream ideas is often strained. It is important that we help our students to accept the ambiguity of not knowing the immediate solution and to learn to work with multiple perspectives on an issue.

One lesson that we can teach is that it is important not to accept simple or quick answers to complicated problems. Another is that it is possible to use ethical standards to assess how we can best proceed. As we discuss these complex issues in the classroom, it will be important to create an atmosphere in which differing views are considered and respected. The discussions can be used as an opportunity to consider not just differing student perspectives, but the views of people on various sides of the conflict around the world.

Although we would all like simple and quick solutions where justice is served, there are few simple answers to the complex political, international, and judicial issues posed by terrorism, war, and the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Students must become knowledgeable about government, international relations, cultures, politics, religions, gender roles, economics, and geography. They must read, question, and discuss. They will need our leadership in guiding and facilitating these discussions, and they will need to have a safe environment in which to make sense of their own thinking and the thinking of others. ESR offers these additional [guidelines for teaching](#)

[controversial issues](#).

We can also help students to develop a more complex understanding by introducing the concepts of win-win, win-lose, and lose-lose solutions to conflicts. Explore different ideas about what winning and victory mean. Examine different perspectives on the possible short and long-term consequences if the U.S. wins and Saddam Hussein's government loses. How can a win for some be a loss for others on the same side? How can you win in some ways and lose in others?

## **26. How can I deal with the wide range of opinions students may have?**

Opinions about the war may vary greatly, from strong support to strong opposition, especially among older students. Because some students have close personal connections with those directly involved in the war—students whose family members are serving in the armed forces in the Persian Gulf, living in regions of the world that are central in the turmoil, or active in protests against the war—the disagreements among them could be significant and heated.

It is important to help students separate the issues of patriotism from agreement or disagreement with government policies. In addition, we can encourage students to clarify whether their opinions are about the character and actions of nations/governments or the character and actions of people who are citizens within a particular nation/government. It is also important to help students understand that one can support the troops who are fighting in the war and still oppose or

raise questions about policy issues, about the use of war as a vehicle for resolving conflicts, or about U.S. involvement in war. We can communicate to students that different viewpoints enrich our understanding and can be shared without making personal attacks—it's a part of what it means to live in a democracy.

When discussing controversial issues, teach students how to engage in non-adversarial dialogue, rather than debate. In dialogue, the goal is to listen, to learn from others' perspectives, and to understand more deeply. Debate emphasizes proving that you are right and that the other person/group is wrong. It is best to avoid the polarization produced by debates; instead, structure the conversation as a dialogue, where each position is illuminated so that it can be understood clearly. Additional lesson plans on [promoting constructive dialogues](#) and on [conflict resolution](#) are available through ESR.

As a first step in constructing a productive dialogue about the war, you may want to set some [ground rules](#) so that children feel safe to share their thoughts and opinions. The students themselves can help construct this list, which might include such things as "no put downs," "respect each other's feelings and points of view," and "let each person finish speaking before responding." You will want to communicate that this is an opportunity for them to hear the diversity of feelings and opinions about these issues and a chance to learn from each other. In terms of dealing with different opinions, you may want to have students formalize a

respectful way of disagreeing by having students state their disagreements in the form of “I see things differently. I think that...” rather than telling other students that they are wrong. It is important that you and your students find ways to affirm different perspectives even if they are unpopular.

This kind of conversation is an important way for students to learn to appreciate the feelings of others. It is also an opportunity for them to comprehend and learn from the different perspectives of the students in their class.

**27. In situations where students have parents or other loved ones involved in the war, how do I hold a respectful discussion that might include perspectives that are opposed to the war?**

If teachers know that one or more of their students have parents or loved ones directly involved in the war, they may want to talk with those students in advance of any classroom discussions, if you are planning one. Share with the students that there is going to be a classroom discussion about the war. Let them know that you are aware that this may bring up some difficult feelings for them and you will be present for them in that event. You can check in to see if they may or may not want to be present in the room, or whether they want to be with a friend during that time. You may inquire whether they would like to speak to the class, thereby creating an opportunity for others to listen and learn about the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of their fellow students.

Before any classroom discussion, it is important that teachers first acknowledge that many people serving in the military, especially during times of war, are motivated by a powerful commitment to their country, the people in it, and the values that it stands for. Their commitment is so strong that they are willing to risk their lives. Teachers can also point out that many people who oppose the war are motivated by some of the same feelings and commitments. Historically, those who have fought in wars, and those who resisted injustice nonviolently, have, each in their own way, risked their lives.

In the United States, decisions to go to war are ultimately made by the President and Congress. Once the decision is made, even if they oppose the reasons for going to war, many people express their support for people in the military and hope for their well-being. While ongoing differences of opinion about the war will continue to exist, even within the military and the current administration, these differences do not need to negate many people’s feelings of pride in the commitment of many in the military to serve their country. Nor do these differences need to negate many people’s pride in the commitment of many protestors to utilize constitutionally protected forms of dissent to improve their country.

**28. How do I address a situation in which a parent or loved one has been a casualty of the war, especially if I know there are differences of opinion about the war in my classroom?**

First, make sure that your school has a crisis management team and grief counseling plans in place. When someone's parent or loved one dies or is seriously hurt, the primary focus of the class should be on ways to support their peer and acknowledge the tragedy during this painful time. Students who lose a relative may become fervently pro-government policies or might be angry at government policies, but be careful not to make assumptions about their reactions. It's important to keep checking in with the student. When discussions touch on potentially painful topics, it's useful to get a sense of whether they wish to be present or not. Asking the student directly, "What is it you need right now?" could be beneficial if the topic of war comes up.

**29. If young people want to do something, is it appropriate to encourage them to act? What realistically can adolescents do?**

Wars, terrorism, and military interventions are scary for adults and young people alike. They also evoke other strong feelings including anger, hatred, and expressions of emotion such as bravado, a desire for revenge, etc. One way to help young people deal constructively with these feelings is to engage them in taking actions that make a difference. There are many [actions that young people can take](#), and possibly the

most important one is to learn more about the issue. From there, however, it is important that young people learn to act to make a difference in their own environment first.

They can set up study groups with friends, organize a town meeting in their school or community to talk with others about their concerns or questions, put together a library shelf of books on the issue, or express their point of view in a [letter to the editor](#). They also can join with adults or other young people who are helping to increase security in a wide variety of ways, such as fund-raising for programs like school mediation or peer education.

However, it is important that the children generate and implement the actions that they choose to pursue. Although it may be helpful for children to know the range of things that other children and adults are doing to make a difference, adults must remember not to enlist young people in their own causes. Because young people know about a particular issue, it does not mean that it is their sole responsibility to solve the problem. They need to see adults actively engaged in solutions as well.

**30. What should schools do if students wish to hold protests, vigils, and other types of demonstrations either in support of the troops or in opposition to the war?**

Students may want to express their opinions through leaflets, protests, vigils, and other types of demonstrations. This presents a

teachable moment for educators. Students have a right to free speech, and one of education's fundamental goals is to encourage active participation in our democracy. We need to honor this urge to take action. Teachers can help students to think through their purposes and how to take action appropriately, constructively, respectfully, and in ways that encourage ongoing dialogue.

In the past, groups with differing opinions regarding government policies have co-sponsored vigils at which all participants expressed concern, and hope for the safety, of everyone affected by the conflict.

Teachers should encourage students to collaborate with administrators to find an appropriate vehicle for the expression of their views and to ensure administrator awareness. Administrators may require that students who miss classes are counted as absent. By communicating and coordinating, students can look for ways to take action but not compromise their academic standing.

Students have the right to pass out leaflets on school grounds but not in ways that disrupt classes. If the school decides to bring in outside speakers, there is a legal responsibility to provide access for speakers with a range of viewpoints about an issue.

If some form of demonstration is taking place on school grounds, teachers also can help make sure that order is maintained. Afterwards, teachers can discuss with students what happened,

how they felt, validate the importance of expressing one's beliefs, and discuss other ways to take constructive action.

For more information about students' first amendment rights and on teaching the first amendment, contact [The First Amendment Center](#).

### **31. What are goals to keep in mind when talking with students about the current world situation?**

This conversation with students will not be a one time occurrence. The war in Iraq will come up over time, even after the war ends. Students need to take time to process their feelings and thoughts. Therefore we will need to think about our long term goals for talking with students.

We would like to suggest six primary goals:

1. We are talking with students in order to help them understand that they are not alone in their thinking and feelings and to give them a safe place to share and struggle with each other about the issues that come up for them;
2. We want to help students gain confidence in their ability to understand what is going on around them, to acquire information from a variety of sources, to appreciate divergent perspectives, and to learn about complex issues;
3. We want to prevent the emergence of stereotyping and prevent the victimization of any group of people;

4. We want to help students understand the human and environmental consequences of war;
5. We want to help students explore alternatives to violent responses to civil and international conflicts and learn conflict resolution skills that might enable them to deal more effectively with conflicts both personal and global. We want students to know about adults in all walks of life who work for justice, build community, and resolve conflicts constructively;
6. We want to encourage students to empower themselves by providing opportunities for students to make a difference.

There are no easy answers to the issues we have raised here. These discussions will be challenging. They call upon us to do our best teaching in the most difficult of circumstances. Yet they are vitally important to the young people in our classroom. They can provide our students with the support, hope, and understanding they need in this difficult time.

### **32. What can schools, together with families and community, do to help?**

Schools can help in a number of important ways. Above all else they can provide a safe, caring, and supportive environment for children to talk with each other about their thoughts and feelings. This helps children understand that they are not alone, and that there are caring adults and other young people

who share their concerns. Formally and informally checking-in with students shows we're concerned about them as individuals. Providing a caring network both at home and at school is reassuring to children and supports a normal level of functioning. Sticking to basic routines also helps reassure students that their world hasn't turned upside down.

Secondly, schools can help young people overcome the sense of powerlessness that often arises in this kind of situation. Young people have many questions about violence and conflict in the world. Helping them pursue answers to these questions and helping them learn more about ways they can deal with conflict creatively is empowering to young people. They gain confidence in their ability to understand what is going on around them, to acquire information from a variety of sources, to appreciate divergent perspectives, and to learn about complex issues.

One of the most effective ways to involve young people of all ages in this exploration is to ask them to brainstorm:

1. What they already know about the issues at hand;
2. What they think they know but are not sure about;
3. Any questions they have about it (after prioritizing their questions, the class can make plans for how to research answers); and
4. What [security and insecurity](#) means to them, and how they can help keep each other safe.

You might also want to check out [our free lesson plans](#) for discussing the

meaning of security and other key concepts touched on in this guide.

Thirdly, schools can actively prevent the emergence of dehumanization, prejudice, stereotyping, and victimization of any group. Adults in young people's lives, at home and at school, can help young people manage their emotions, resolve conflict, and interrupt prejudice. But even more importantly, we can demonstrate ways that children can support each other and respect each other's backgrounds and perspectives. By helping young people understand the human consequences of violence in any form, schools can help

them become more sensitive to other people's feelings and points of view.

Finally, young people's questions about these issues come up over and over again, even after a particular violent event isn't on the news every night. Children process their feelings and thoughts over time. Therefore it is helpful to think about some long term goals. To this end, ESR has developed a sequel to this guide, [Responding to Violent Events By Building Community: Action Ideas for Students and Schools](#). We hope it will help as we all work to build a world of safety and peace.

## About Educators for Social Responsibility

Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) is a national non-profit organization that was founded in 1982. Our mission is to make teaching social responsibility a core practice in education so that young people develop the convictions and skills to shape a safe, sustainable, democratic, and just world.

ESR is a national leader in educational reform. Our work spans the fields of social and emotional learning, character education, conflict resolution, diversity education, civic engagement, prevention programming, youth development, and secondary school improvement. We offer comprehensive programs, staff development, consultation, and resources for adults who teach children and young people preschool through high school, in settings including K-12 schools, early childhood centers, and afterschool programs. We also publish high quality resources for anyone involved in the lives of young people including our award-winning Adventures in Peacemaking series and our bestselling Conflict Resolution Education Series. You can learn more about our award-winning resources and programs by visiting us at <http://www.esrnational.org> or by contacting us at 1-800-370-2515.

For more information about workshops and resources addressing conflict resolution, social and emotional learning, character development, peaceable schools, and the appreciation of diversity, please call ESR at 1-800-370-2515, or email us at [educators@esrnational.org](mailto:educators@esrnational.org).

## Credits

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# **Appendix: Essential Questions about the War with Iraq**

## **The Middle East and the Current Crisis**

- What is the history of the U.S. Government's relationship with the governments' of the Middle East? Why has the relationship between the U.S. government and governments in the Arab and Muslim world been challenging for all the parties involved? How has economics played a part in this history? How has culture played a part in this history? What might be different interpretations of this history from different points of view?
- What role does culture, government, and religion play in these situations? In what ways have differences in culture, political philosophies, and religion exacerbated tensions? How can we work with cultural, political, and religious diversity to find solutions?
- Through the U.S. military intervention in Iraq, what future should residents of the U.S. hope to shape there? In the rest of the Middle East? In the world? What future do we hope to shape here in the U.S.? In the aftermath of this intervention, what responsibility, if any, does the U.S. government have to rebuild Iraq?
- What is the role of the Israeli/Palestinian dispute in the politics of the Middle East?

## **Threats to World Order, National and International Responses**

- What are the causes of terrorism? What are ways to address the causes? What are different theories about ways to counter terrorism effectively?
- What are weapons of mass destruction? How can we create a safer world in which the threat from such weapons is minimized?
- What have we learned from history and international relations that will help us better understand current conflicts around the globe? What is the role of diplomacy, international institutions like the U.N., and international coalitions in preventing war or intervening to address injustice?
- What is the history of nonviolent efforts to repel invasions and overthrow repressive governments?

## Ethical Issues and International Crises

- How do we address the ethical dilemmas involved in war situations? For example, is it appropriate to intervene preemptively and how do we determine if that point is reached? Is there a level of threat that is so great that military preemption is justified, and if so what is that level of threat?
- When is it appropriate for a nation to use military force? What is the appropriate justification for declaring war?
- Are there times when oppression and injustice rise to the level of a humanitarian crisis that justifies military intervention by another country in order to alleviate such suffering? When?
- What are nonviolent alternatives to warfare for solving disputes? What nonviolent methods exist for countering repression and injustice? How have people overthrown dictators and repelled military occupations nonviolently and what can we learn from these examples?
- What is security? How can people or countries work to protect or increase security?
- What are strategic interests? What are ethical ways for governments to pursue strategic interests?
- What are the requirements of the [laws of war](#) (the Geneva Convention, etc.)? What are war crimes? What dilemmas arise when trying to implement the laws of war? Should the laws of war be changed?
- In recent decades we have entered a new period in the history of warfare. Powerful modern weapons have led to an increase in the percentage of civilian casualties in twentieth century wars. Yet, precision-guided munitions might create the potential to decrease civilian casualties in war. As the U.S. Government and the Iraqi Government wage war, what is their responsibility to innocent bystanders?

## The U.S. Role in the World

- How can individual citizens in the U.S. respond in times of crisis or war? How does a democratic government respond in times of crisis or war? What is the meaning of patriotism? What is the role of dissent in times of crisis or war? How is American power interpreted around the world?
- What is the history of U.S. foreign policy and how is it interpreted by historians with different points of view?
- As the preeminent superpower, what role should the United States play in the world?
- How is the U.S. role as the world's sole superpower interpreted by people with varying perspectives around the world?
- How might the U.S. move forward with a commitment to confront injustice while also promoting compassion and civility?
- How should U.S. citizens balance their role as citizens of a nation-state with their responsibilities toward the world community, especially in relation to the international institutions designed to manage conflict and promote understanding among nations?

Please send comments about these questions or the guide as a whole, or e-mail inquiries about reprinting rights, to: [educators@esnational.org](mailto:educators@esnational.org)