by Lynda Crawford
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A child development specialist in Indiana was recently told by 40 percent of the children she interviewed that their parents had not spoken to them about the war. Is it possible that New York City kids are experiencing the same silence at home?

The New York City Department of Education has posted guidelines for parents and teachers for talking to children about war.

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

According to these guidelines, prepared by the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center, adolescents need a variety of opportunities to talk about their feelings, when they are ready, without forcing them. School-age children, too, benefit from being asked about their feelings and what they've heard, and given accurate information in response to their comments and questions. For toddlers and preschool children, remaining calm and maintaining the ordinary routine of life is what helps.

As expected, watching too much television coverage of war, violence and terrorism, especially graphic images, can be harmful to children of all ages.

Parents need not worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say, according to the guidelines. "There is no answer that will make everything okay." But avoiding the discussion altogether can cause harm. "Silence won't protect them from what is happening, but silence will prevent them from understanding and coping with it."

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The Board of Education guidelines for teachers stress that children with friends or family members involved in Iraq or in military service may have difficulty with discussions about the war, as will students with prior traumatic experiences (such as 9/11). Students might avoid

telling their classmates or teachers that family members are in military service so teachers are encouraged to conduct all classroom discussions assuming that some of their students are personally affected.

Teachers are also urged not to impose their own political beliefs on students, to allow for differing viewpoints during discussions, promoting tolerance for different opinions.

Children may find it comforting if they can figure out ways to be helpful at this time. The guidelines suggest encouraging children to think about how they might want to do, allowing them to decide what would be most meaningful.

OPEN A DISCUSSION

The New York University Child Study Center has a similar set of guidelines, "Talking to Kids about Terrorism or War,"
written by Robin Goodman, Director of Public Education Programs, at NYU Child Study Center and Clinical Associate Professor at NYU School of Medicine.

Contrary to parents' fears, writes Goodman, talking about violent acts will not increase a child's fear. Having children keep scared feelings to themselves is more damaging than open discussion.

Regarding television and news reports, Goodman suggests watching or reading the news together as the best way for a parent to gauge a child's reaction and open a discussion. The dialogue should allow for disagreement and airing of different points of view; feeling their opinion is wrong or misunderstood can cause children to disengage.

Adults can be honest about their fears, said Goodman, but must avoid distraught reactions so as not to scare their children or students.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Cornell University has also contributed to the literature on this subject with "In America at War: Children and Parents Under Siege,"
written by James Garbarino, professor of Human Development at Cornell University and Co-Director of the Family Life Development Center.

Parents and teachers can use the present circumstances, suggests Garbarino, to teach children about justice, compassion, and revenge.

"Protecting the stigmatized from scapegoating and guilt by association is an important goal of public institutions in a time of national crisis" writes Garbarino. "In the wake of Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II we rounded up Japanese-Americans and detained them as suspected enemies of the state... .Understanding and compassion in the face of hate and fanaticism are virtues, not something to be afraid of. It is more than a matter of our good and their evil. Dehumanization is the enemy."

WHO IS TALKING TO THE KIDS

While teachers and parents are finding their way to talking to children about the war, children are talking to each other, even if only sending their thoughts out into the ether. A visit to Voices of Youth,
a bulletin board set up by UNICEF for children around the world to communicate on the subject of war, allows us to hear some of those young voices. Here is a recent one from the United States (they identify themselves at the site by first name, age, and country, not city or state), twelve-year old Charlotte: "Does anyone here understand why we are at war?"

Meanwhile, high school students, only a few years older than Charlotte, are being contacted by military recruiters. A little-known provision of the new federal education law, No Child Left Behind, requires public and private high schools to provide names, addresses and phone numbers of their students to the armed forces; only Quaker schools or others with religious objections to military service are exempt. Young men who reach the age of 18 are already required to register with the selective service, but the new law gives military recruiters direct access to even younger children. Incentives offered to these teenagers to enlist in the military upon graduation from high school are scholarships to college and, particularly enticing to immigrant children, the right to immediately apply for citizenship, waiving the standard waiting

period of three years for those in the military and five years for citizens. Fifteen and sixteen year old New Yorkers have already begun getting these calls and letters.

Perhaps parents and teachers should be speaking to them first.