

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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## **PARENTS: BE PREPARED TO HANDLE CHILDREN'S CONCERNS ABOUT WAR**

DALLAS – March 25, 2003 – Talking to children about war and maintaining a normal routine can help ease the anxieties they may feel, according to psychologists at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

“When a child hears that the United States is at war, the initial reaction can be to feel a sense of insecurity and personal danger,” says Dr. Pete Stavinoha, assistant professor of psychology at UT Southwestern. “It is extremely important to give children a sense of safety and security. Children will be looking to adults for guidance on how to react to war and any ongoing terror threats, and will be relying on adults for reassurance and a sense of normalcy.”

While maintaining family routines is important, it's also necessary for parents to talk honestly with children about war.

“They should be allowed to ask questions about what's going on as well as be assured of the relative safety for themselves and their families,” says Dr. Thomas Van Hoose, a clinical associate professor of psychology at UT Southwestern. “If the family has a loved one in the Gulf who is in combat, the children should be given honest information but reassuring answers about that person and what he or she is doing there.”

Conversations as well as exposure to war news should be age-appropriate. Children younger than 9 or 10 probably don't need to be drawn into protracted war talk or watch televised coverage, he says. Older children should watch such coverage with their parents, who can answer questions, interpret events and reassure them. Van Hoose says families should also discuss the possibility of terrorist attacks and increased security precautions.

Avoiding these frank discussions with children could lead to irrational fears, nightmares or withdrawal, possibly resulting in “long-lasting emotional consequences,” Van Hoose warns.

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Stavinoha says it is important that adults maintain a sense of calm and control for children. If parents are fearful or anxious, children are going to pick up on this and may have similar reactions.

Younger children in particular may not understand that the war is taking place far from their community, and literally may think that bombs will be falling in their back yard. A quick geography lesson will show them that the fighting is occurring halfway around the world and offer reassurance that they are safe at home.

It is important for parents to be aware of signs of anxiety and stress in children, Stavinoha adds. These include persistent worry, sadness, problems falling asleep, nightmares, withdrawal from family and friends, excessive dependence on a family member and decreased activity.

“Parents should be prepared to let their children express their feelings according to the child’s timeline, and be supportive,” he says.

Parents should not hesitate to contact a pediatrician or mental health professional if they have concerns.

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