

What to Do If Your Child is Becoming Obsessed With the War **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

One mother wrote that two of her three sons were acting in strange ways to the televised impact of the war. The oldest son seemed to say little, leaving his mother to wonder what feelings he was really dealing with. The middle and youngest sons appeared to be obsessed with the war coverage--the middle one appeared enthralled with the war--by play acting bombings and seemingly enjoying the battle scenes. The youngest kept it simple, "Why don't we just kill them all, it's no big deal".

Where are these children coming from? Are their reactions normal? Are some kids becoming obsessed with the war on TV?

How to best deal with a child who seems to be fascinated with the fighting, or shows a lack of compassion for those who are hurt.

Bystander Curiosity: The middle son is most likely exhibiting what is known as "bystander curiosity"--a field long-studied by social psychologists. Researchers have found that children respond to crises in many different ways--generally dependent upon their individual temperament. It is not uncommon in human nature for kids, or adults for that matter, to become fascinated with fighting, often becoming excited when bombs explode and the noise and bright lights occur on television. Remember, TV is "unreal" to many of use--we don't smell the smoke, see the destruction first hand, or have to touch the blood of those who are wounded. Children who respond with "fascination" are not that different from people who drive by a car accident--craning their necks to take in the sight, as long as the accident doesn't involve them or a loved one. This "bystander curiosity" doesn't make the kid callous or selfish--it's normal to be curious about the unusual or the exciting, even though others may be negatively affected. This in no way is suggestive that the child is heartless--just curious.

What to do: Remind the child that the bombs that are seen are not PlayStation animation. Real bombs hurt real people and destroy real buildings. Discuss how you perceive the situation, how you feel for the innocent citizens who have little control over their fate, and the poor medical response available. The point is not to sadden the child, but to slow him down for a few minutes for some heartfelt introspection and realization that this is not a game to those people and that you expect some compassion. Sometimes, children are not aware of how their words or behaviors come across, and they may not understand that their "excitement and curiosity" may be interpreted by others as callous indifference. Children need to be taught about others' perceptions and how important it is to be responsible for the way in which one comes across.

What about the child who asks, "Why don't we just kill them all, it's no big deal!", as did the youngest son? Please don't take this literally--most likely at least one of two dynamics may be at work--use of a common defense mechanism (denial) and/or children becoming somewhat immune to violence and destruction as seen on television. Let's take a look at these:

One of the best defense mechanisms to use when feeling threatened, weak or vulnerable is to engage in denial--that the events of the past 2 weeks are not really happening, in a sense, since they do not affect you directly and therefore you, personally, are not vulnerable to the attacks or the feelings that go along with them. After all, feeling for the citizens of Iraq, the POWs, or the wounded Allied troops will hurt, so it's easier to deny how horrible the situation is. Therefore, "it's no big deal" can certainly come in handy when you don't want to feel the pain of others.

Also, kids can become so immune to TV violence and death that the destruction seen on the news may be perceived by them as "less than real events". "If it's not in my world, so to speak, if it doesn't affect me directly, then it isn't happening in reality." Parents need to reinforce how real the attacks are, and that this is not a video game experience, especially for the child who appears to be insensitive to world events.

How about the oldest son--who says little about the war and seems to keep his feelings to himself? Some children are just, by nature, more fearful than others. They may tend to mix their own troubles ("I'm not well liked at school, I'm doing poorly academically, my parents are considering divorce") with the trauma of war and just find it too difficult to consider, to discuss, and therefore, to resolve. Also, children who are temperamentally shy, anxious or threat-sensitive might even show physical signs of distress and pressure, such as headaches, "phantom aches and pains", or random nausea not associated with food-related issues.

Their reticence should be respected--some children need lots of introspection and quiet time to put things into perspective. They may also feel somewhat guilty about feeling sad regarding their own troubles, when our troops are fighting for our country. These kids need extra attention, respect, and invitations to talk. They also need to be reassured that it's okay to worry about their own, day-to-day troubles even though larger issues may be occurring worldwide. Give them acceptance for their feelings, while gently prodding their conversation.