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Straight Talk with Kids About War

Can we field questions honestly, or does “age appropriateness” require soft-pedaling the awful truth of war?

Summer 2003

By *Michael Ames Connor*

With war and its aftermath saturating popular media, kids ask questions. Like most parents, I tremble at the prospect of explaining humanity’s destructive practices to young people. Childhood should be about wonder, community, and inquiry, not delving into the details of evil. When it comes to slavery, poverty, and war, there are no easy answers for children’s questions.

The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) publishes an online guide for parents and educators to answer “tough questions” from children about war.

(www.pbs.org/parents/issuesadvice/talkingwithkids/war/questions.html)



Anti-war protesters in Oakland.
-Photo: Kathy Sloane

Some of PBS’s suggested answers to children’s questions make sense. For example:

If your child asks, “What is war?”

“Before I’d give an answer, I’d say, ‘Tell me what you know about it.’”

This from Nancy Carlsson-Paige, an education professor who studies conflict resolution. The response “tell me what you know about it” allows kids a chance to explore what they think and feel. Answers cue the adult about what might be troubling to the child.

WAR AND GOOD INTENTIONS

Much of PBS’s online guide advocates deceiving children by assuming that justification for the U.S. invasion of Iraq is more important than honest, albeit troubling, answers.

Consider the following exchange:

If your child asks, “Will children be killed?”

The answer depends on the age of the child. I would say to young children, “Soldiers and people who fight this war don’t want to hurt children.” I don’t think young children need to know about casualties. Elementary school children who may have heard it on the news sometimes need an explanation like “Kids can be wounded or hurt.”

— *Betsy Groves, LICSW, Director of the Child Witness to Violence Project at Boston Medical Center, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Boston University Medical School.*

Critical readers may have some “tough questions” of our own. What war is Groves talking about? War kills people. War kills children. It kills soldiers and bystanders, old people and young people. War transforms ordinary people into killers. That’s what war is.

War is messy. Whatever soldiers’ *intentions*, military aggression and occupation require violence directed at ordinary people. To pretend otherwise does a disservice to a child. Laurent Van der Stockt, a photographer working for the Gamma Agency and under contract for the *New York Times Magazine*, described one confrontation between U.S. Marines and Iraqi civilians:

A second vehicle drove up. The same scenario was repeated. Its passengers were killed on the spot. A grandfather was walking slowly with a cane on the sidewalk. They killed him too. As with the old man, the Marines fired on an SUV driving along the river bank that was getting too close to them. Riddled with bullets, the vehicle rolled over. Two women and a child got out, miraculously still alive. They sought refuge in the wreckage. A few seconds later, it flew into bits as a tank lobbed a terse shot into it.

The key phrase in Groves’ answer is “this war.” Experts like Groves prioritize defending “this war” above telling the truth. It’s a little sliver of nationalism pushed under the skin of young people, asking them to believe a lie for the good of the national effort.

The response assumes that difficult questions can be deflected by appealing to good intentions of participants. “Soldiers ... don’t want to hurt children...” While true, it is a partial, unsatisfying truth. It says nothing about the ways that experiences, power, social pressures, and situations shape behavior. The soldiers described by Van der Stockt probably enlisted more for college tuition than for the chance to shell civilians — but intentions give way to harsh realities. The soldiers who massacred hundreds of civilians at Mai Lai didn’t enter the armed forces intending to murder ordinary people — but accumulated rage, hatred, racism, and violence took their toll. Wars mobilize and depend on these very emotions, often with disastrous results.

Wars kill children, and to pretend otherwise is dishonest. What if the child asks about slavery in America, or the Holocaust in Europe? Would we first seek to absolve participants of the intention of harming children? Would we seek to minimize the damage done for these atrocities by merely saying that “children were wounded or hurt”?

MORE REASSURANCES, LESS HONESTY

Nationalism continues in other exchanges on the PBS site. For example:

If a 6-year-old said, “Will other children die, Mommy?” you can simply say, “The army will do everything they can to keep them safe.” ... If the child does press you, you might say, “Sometimes there’s an accident and children are hurt or killed.”

— *Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Director of the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children’s Center in Boston.*

Almost nothing here is true. The armed forces, far from doing “everything they can do” to keep people safe, in fact do many things that endanger people. These include launching hundreds and hundreds of missiles into cities. (Baghdad, a city of 6 million, includes about three million children under fifteen years old.)

Other answers suggested by PBS encourage us to emphasize that the war is happening far away, as if horror experienced by strangers shouldn’t make us upset. “This war is happening thousands of miles away and there is no reason anyone here will be hurt,” is an answer suggested by Groves. Such a formulation qualifies horror by distancing ourselves from it.

PBS’s answers assume that support for the U.S. attack trumps telling the truth about war. Indeed, the online experts offer no advice that takes seriously an anti-war perspective. And for a religious perspective on war, PBS reaches out to ... chaplains in the armed forces, who tell kids to pray or “write a letter to a soldier, sailor, air man, or marine.”

CHILDREN'S AGENCY

Answers to kids' questions can be much more honest and satisfying if justifying U.S. foreign policy is not the top priority. We can begin by admitting that war is horrible and deadly. Details aren't necessary, but the overarching truth is.

Let's return to the question, "Will children be killed?" Instead of minimizing, we could offer an honest, age-appropriate answer: "War is horrible. It hurts many, many people."

This answer may, in fact, be troubling to children. Numbled by feel-good news coverage of the U.S. invasion, adults may be loathe to admit that war is troubling. So are poverty, slavery, and other human-created miseries. The job of adults is not to convince children to feel safe about war but to help them process fear in constructive ways. War makes most sane people — kids and adults — afraid.

We can admit to our children that the world is not how we would like it, that parents and teachers are not omnipotent, that terrible things occur beyond our control.

Should children be reassured? Of course. Let's tell our children, "We love you, and we're going to take care of you." War doesn't change that.

But the truth, and our answers, don't stop there. "Millions and millions of people all over the world hate war and work to end it. That's why your parents and teachers write letters, and meet with people, and sing songs, and march together. We're trying to stop the wars. Children like you can help."

In our conversations with young people we can stress not our distance from those under attack by U.S. forces, but our connections with them. "Children in Iraq (or Iran, or Colombia, or wherever the U.S. is invading currently) want to be safe just like you. They have families and schools and neighborhoods too." Unlike PBS, we can take a child's question as both a quest for reassurance and an opportunity to reinforce empathy and caring action — what the big kids call solidarity.

Telling children lies may make adults feel better, but it leaves fears unacknowledged and unaddressed. Children who work with others to tackle social problems need less reassurance. They know they can take action, and they know they're not alone. They understand all people feel afraid sometimes.

Children undoubtedly have ideas about how to stop war or help those hurt by war. Older children can draw on historical and contemporary campaigns for justice organized by young people. Anglo-American child labor, apartheid, and nuclear testing all faced off with mobilized young people, and all fell. Adults looking to field tough questions about war should place love, honesty, and support for children's agency above flimsy nationalistic reassurances.

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