

EXPERT ANSWERS

A child psychologist helps you field the tough questions your students may ask.

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Depending on a student's personal circumstances, war may feel remote or terrifyingly close to home. And while some are likely to turn to their teachers for much-needed reassurance as well as a clearer understanding of events, others may not be eager to hear more about the war. For these reasons, it is a good idea to follow your students' lead, answering questions when they arise without prolonging or forcing discussion. It's also wise to be prepared for some potentially difficult questions, like those I've tried to anticipate here, from children in grades 6 and up. No matter what age group you teach, approach students' questions about war with honesty, sensitivity, and reassurance.

Why have other countries—and some people in the U.S.—disagreed with the President about the need to go to war?

Teachers have an opportunity to build a lively class discussion around this question. Turn it back to the group, asking students to consider the positions of various countries. What reasons might have motivated France or Russia, for example, to oppose the war? With this approach, you provide an even broader lesson about the importance, in the process of conflict resolution, of trying to understand the perspectives and circumstances of others.

The issue of war protests at home, likewise, presents an opportunity for fruitful discussion. Emphasize that one of the things we cherish in a democracy is everyone's right to express opinions freely, even if they disagree with the government.

Will there be more terrorist attacks here at home because of the war?

Most children in grade 6 and above understand that even very smart adults have limited knowledge about the

future. They will accept the fact that no one knows whether there will be terrorist attacks. Acknowledge that there are some who believe that retaliatory incidents are likely; but there are also others who believe that drawing this "line in the sand" for Iraq will help prevent future attacks on the U.S. A lively class discussion might ensue, but don't lose sight of the emotionally loaded quality of this question. The underlying need is for reassurance about being safe. Stress that our government and our local authorities are doing everything within their power to protect us from terrorism.

Are our troops in danger? Will Iraq use chemical or biological weapons against them?

As always, be honest but reassuring. Be especially sensitive to the possibility that some of your students may have a relative or close family friend in the war theater. Point out the fact that the military has tried to prepare for the worst, with immunizations, protective equipment, and special training for those who might be exposed. Everything possible is being done to protect our troops.

My brother (father, mother, other relative) is fighting in the war. Will he (or she) be OK?

A student with a loved one in the armed services is surely feeling both fear and pride, and it is important to acknowledge and respond to both. To address the first, you might say something like, "I understand why you may be worried, but the chances are that he (or she) will be safe. The military is doing everything possible to protect its members." With respect to the second, you could say something like, "You must be very proud of him (or her). He (or she) is doing a wonderful thing for our country. When you write, please let him (or her) know how grateful we are."

Will children and other innocent people in Iraq be hurt?

Be honest, though measured, in your response. You might say, "Yes, sadly there will probably be some innocent Iraqi citizens, including children, injured or killed. But our military has made it clear that our forces are doing everything possible to avoid that. We are using special strategies and technology to protect the Iraqi people, and we are sending food and medical supplies to help those in need."

How long will the war last?

Young people are yearning to hear that the danger is almost over. Aren't we all? Respond with honest assessments based on reliable news reports, but no matter what the outlook, emphasize that the U.S. will not fight for one minute longer than is necessary to achieve the goal of protecting its citizens from any future harm.

What can we do to help?

Children of all ages frequently feel better if they can contribute to humanitarian causes in times of emergency. One easy way for children to get involved is to e-mail messages of support to American troops. (See note, below.) Beyond this, teachers should be alert to whatever the government recommends.

NOTE: The U.S. military is not currently supporting a campaign for print mail to troops. The Department of Defense recommends sending e-mail via <http://anyservicemember.navy.mil/>