

Talking to children about the death of the “enemy”

People have celebrated in the streets and have asked for applause with the news of the death of Osama bin Laden. Some are ecstatic. Others are concerned and afraid. Many talk about justice and relief. But how might children perceive events like these?

Many children did not know much about bin Laden and may not pay much attention to news in general. But they are likely to be aware of at least parts of the situation when a major battle is called a success or when an “enemy” figure dies or is killed. Several issues should be kept in mind when adults talk to children about these events.

Know what you believe.

The first step for adults who care for or about children is to examine their own feelings. How do you feel about using military vs. non-violent means to solve disputes? Do you believe that killing is sometimes justified? When? Are you afraid? If so, what scares you? Then decide what values and ideas you want to communicate to children.

Note that some people have said that war is never as ugly as when you need to describe it to children. It is not easy to face reality while using the level of detail and directness needed for children to understand. Examine your thoughts and feelings. As you think about talking with children, you may change your thoughts. Choose words that will express what you want to communicate to the children.

A note for adults caring for other people’s children: Remember that your feelings may not be the same as the children’s parents’. It is up to the parents to provide the primary values orientation. Share what you believe, but explain to the children that different people believe different things. Encourage them to talk with their parents about these topics.

Children are likely to be confused.

There will be names, places, and events in the news at these times that are not familiar to children. A child’s response when things are unfamiliar is to think of something similar that they know. This can lead to significant confusion, and the areas about which they are confused are hard to predict (some examples from previous events—confusing “hijacker” with “kyacker” or the Gulf War with a war over golf). Adults should listen to the children and make sure they know that it is OK to ask questions. Watch for misunderstandings and correct them.

A unique confusion may occur at this time. Children also are likely to be confused by the mismatch between this response to death and previous experiences. If a loved one has died, children will have learned that death is a time for crying and remembering. The idea of rejoicing and cheering a death can feel wrong. If you believe that killing is sometimes justified, you will need to explain that reasoning to the children. If you believe killing is never justifiable, it may be easier for children to understand your position.

Be cautious with telling children that killing is sometimes justified. News reports often carry stories of young people taking guns to school or threatening to kill classmates or other people they don't like. Be sure to talk about alternatives to violence and give children education about non-violent conflict resolution.

Children may be relieved, but the feeling may not last.

In children's war-related entertainment programs, the "bad guys" are usually destroyed. But in those programs, the villain often escapes at the end. That allows the program to reintroduce the same characters, but it may give children the sense that there are escaped bad guys around us at all times. It also may contribute to suspicion regarding whether the battle was really won or whether the person is really dead.

The relief that people expect to feel after such a death does not always occur. Studies of victims whose attackers have received the death penalty have shown that the sense of closure, justice, or relief that they thought they would feel did not always materialize. Destroying someone or something else does not make other losses disappear. Loved ones do not come back. So knowing that others are now mourning the loss of a loved one or that someone else has died is often less reassuring than victims expected it to be.

Label behavior rather than people.

During international conflicts it is common to define the situation as "us" vs. "them." We then often see ourselves as good, moral, and right, and the other side as evil, immoral, and wrong. That allows us to feel comfortable about attacking and killing others. We often identify one leader or group as the source or heart of evil. By eliminating that one person or group, we suggest that all the evil will be gone.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), the world is not that simple. All of us are capable of both good and evil. When we teach children that people are either evil or good, we are suggesting that the children are also one or the other. When they make a mistake, they may feel that they are now bad or evil, and so they can do only bad things. Or they may see the school bully as the bad guy who can never be nice. The only way to fix the situation is to get rid of the bully. On the other hand, if they think of themselves as all good, they may not be able to admit that they make mistakes and might need to change.

It can be helpful for both children and adults to focus on the behaviors that we want to stop and those we want to encourage. In this approach, the problem is bullying behaviors, not bullies. And the international problem is terrorist tactics, not terrorists. This approach focuses on the fact that all people need to make choices, and they can make good choices or bad ones. We are all capable of making good choices and doing good things. And this can be reassuring to children.

Avoid excessive celebration.

Football and other sports have recognized that athletes can celebrate too much. It is not good sportsmanship to throw your successes in the face of the other team. The same thing can happen in this situation. One side may be very happy that a battle was won or that a particular person has died, but

some other people may be sad or angry, and the celebration may increase that anger and invite revenge.

Most adults want to raise children who are caring and competent. They want their children be able to get along with other children. To accomplish this goal, one of the most important skills to teach children is empathy—the ability to feel what other people feel. Celebrating when other people are sad or angry does not show empathy. Winning teams can be sensitive to the losers. They can try to keep their celebrations in balance. The same can happen with international or intergroup conflicts. The conflicts get smaller and easier to heal if we understand and respect each other.

Sources:

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