

WAR STORIES  
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(the morning after the American bombing of Baghdad began)

Any child psychologist can tell you that, when words fail children, expressing themselves with a crayon might make them feel better.

As can expressing themselves with lumber. I awoke this morning to the sound of heavy-duty banging. When I came downstairs I found that my 10-year-old son, who woke early with a bad dream, had built a 6-foot cross-bow and a large trebuchet in the living room.

It was hard not to be proud of the scale of what Ben had accomplished. But I was also concerned about what fears his project belied. I snapped some pictures with my camera while he demonstrated his weaponry -- both pieces work well. I asked Ben why he'd built what he'd built. "Don't know," he said. But he did seem free of anxiety, and he hadn't been just a few hours before.

At age 10, Ben is still too young to talk well about what troubles him. My job, then, is to keep my eye on what he does -- and what he builds.

I write sometimes about psychological topics, and in the child psych literature that fills my house there are pounds of information about how to talk to children about war.

Talk in language that is easy to understand.

Answer questions honestly but don't flood a child with information.

Be honest about your feelings and don't rush children through theirs.

Budget extra time for bedtime comforting and be flexible about where scared children can sleep.

Don't let your children watch too much war news -- and make sure that, if they watch at all, you're there to talk about what they saw.

Whatever you do, don't let a child feel helpless. Psychologists define feeling helpless as the essence of trauma. Kids can find ways to make their own contribution to the war effort -- whatever that effort is. They might create memorial sculptures, circulate peace petitions, or help a scared sibling sleep through the night.

This week we are all creating stories that we will tell for the rest of our lives about where we were and how we felt at the start of this war. My story already includes Ben's weaponry. His does, too. I like to think that, in any story that my son or daughter constructs, at least some comforting themes will stand out. Maybe they'll say that adults listened to them. Maybe they'll remember that their questions were answered. Maybe they'll tell their own children someday that, during this war, whenever they were troubled adults extended themselves thoughtfully and calmly.

Here's to hoping that's what they'll say. Here's to hoping for good war stories.

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