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PEACE

War and terrorism. Two horrors on everyone's mind.

Children don't live in a vacuum; they hear about war and terrorism from their parents and the media. Children are asking questions. And parents are struggling with what and how much to tell their children.

As I write this, war seems imminent and the threat of terrorism is not going away any time soon. But I want to focus on peace. Though the world is a scary place right now, I want to focus on ways parents can help their children deal with their fears.

Basically I'm an optimist but sometimes I'm scared about what's going on in the world, you're scared about what's going on in the world, and your children are scared about what's going on in the world.

To my way of thinking, all parents (busy as they may be) have a new task these days. Their new job is to make their home a PLACE OF PEACE AND REASSURANCE. A refuge from the scary outside world.

It's important to be honest with our children but it's never been more important to help our children feel safe. I'm not talking about duct tape, I'm talking about parents calmly determined to give their children the reassurance that they are loved and will be taken care of.

There's no question that making the family home a refuge of peace starts with the parents. How do parents, who may be scared and worried themselves, reassure their children?

-- Get your own act together. Develop equanimity. Be informed, concerned, and prepared but don't dwell on either terrorism or war. Statistically, you and your family will be safe. So take a deep breath and whistle; if you can't manage a happy tune you can still whistle!

-- Turn off the TV. Don't watch cable news, all real and potential disasters are shown over and over again. This overload is unhealthy for your brain. You want news, read the newspapers and listen to public radio or TV.

-- Make your home a violence-free zone. Calm yourself. Teach everybody how to take a time-out when they are heating up before they blurt out an un-peaceful or unkind word. Have family code words to calm each other down when somebody is heating up.

-- Be there for your children. Spend time with each child alone even if it's only a few minutes. Observe each child for signs of fear or worry and figure out the best way to reassure that child. Nothing soothes a frightened child more than the presence of a calm, loving parent.

-- Talk frankly about your feelings. If you're worried say so but temper it with a promise that you'll do everything in your power to keep the child safe.

-- Slow down the pace of family life. Avoid weekends filled with what my grandson calls, "silly, grownup errands". Perfect the art of just hanging out together.

-- Use time-honored techniques to relax and find inner peace like stress-reduction exercises and meditation. Make it a family project to relax together.

-- Lower the noise levels down in your home. Make a game out of who can talk the softest and fine those who yell from another room. Turn off loud music. By the way, I bet you can make your house a more peaceful place if you replace rap or rock with classical music. (After a lecture I gave last week, one mother told me she never bought a classical CD in her life and wondered where to begin. I suggested the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto and Beethoven's Archduke Trio to fill her home and heart with beautiful melody. The Archduke was the first record my mother brought home with our new phonograph, the primitive machine on which we played music in the olden days.)

-- Spend time outdoors. Nature is soothing. I have started buying one fresh flower when I go to the market to brighten my own home and spirits.

-- Find your own family bliss. Be able to say, "We're not going to talk about bad things like war anymore, we need some bliss time together". Then do what makes your family blissful. Anything from hot cocoa on a cold night to a surprise non-birthday party to telling each other the happiest stories you can make up. One mother I know had a party for the entire family even those who were far away by placing pictures of the relatives who could not be there on the table and talking about them during the meal.

Concentrate on peace and a sense of security in your home for the sake of your children. And who knows, if we all concentrated on peace the world might become a better place.

Happy Parenting,

Marilyn Heins, M.D.