

Resilience in a Time of War

Elementary School Children



A time of war can be scary for young children, especially because terrorism has brought fear so close to home.

Events are uncertain for children. Their friends' parents, or perhaps their own parents, may be called away to serve in the military. They look to teachers as well as to parents to make them feel safe in a time of war.

As children start to study subjects that teach them about the world outside of their home, they will need your help to sort it all out. You may wonder how you can teach your child to move beyond the fears that a time of war brings. The good news is that, just as your child learns reading and writing, he or she can learn the skills of resilience -- the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress. What are some tips that can help you teach your children resilience? As you use these tips, keep in mind that each child's journey along the road to resilience will be different and that your own knowledge of your child will guide you.

10 Tips for Parents and Teachers of Elementary School Children in a Time of War

- 1. Talk with your child.** When children have questions, answer them honestly but simply and with reassurance. Ask them what they think is happening, and listen to their answers. Don't discount their feelings--they may say they're afraid, and you should be ready to tell them that fear is all right, but that they must go on with life anyway. Use black-and-white language that leaves no room for doubt, such as, "I will always take care of you."
- 2. Make your home a safe place emotionally for your child.** Spend lots of family time with your child, especially during a time of war. Spend more time with your child playing games, reading, or just holding your child close.
- 3. Limit the amount of news watched by children during a time of war.** Turn off the TV or radio when war coverage is on. You don't need to hide what's happening in the world from your children, but neither do you have to expose them to constant stories about war. Put away magazines and newspapers that have extensive photo coverage of war or frightening covers. Monitor your child's Internet usage to ensure that she isn't going to sites that will give gory or sensationalized accounts of war.
- 4. Realize that the stresses of war may heighten daily stresses.** Your child might normally be able to handle a failed test or teasing, but be understanding that he may respond with anger or bad behavior to stress that normally wouldn't rattle him. Reassure him that you just expect him to do his best.
- 5. During a time of war, map out a routine and stick to it.** Children are reassured by regular schedules. If homework is completed at a certain time, make sure you keep that time for homework. Your child may be less able to handle change at home when the world situation is unstable.

6. **Make sure you take care of yourself.** If you don't, you may have less patience and less creativity at a time when your child needs both to reassure her about her own safety. Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child. Many people find that turning to a higher power, whether through organized religion or privately, can help.
7. **Tell children that they will be all right.** Reassure them that they will be protected. Have an emergency plan for the family and share whatever parts of it you think your child can understand. Share with children the emergency plans their schools have and prepare them--some schools shut down in an emergency with the children inside, and your child needs to know he will be protected at school even if he is not with his parents. If your children have family in the military, help them to understand that this is their family member's job, just like their job is to go to school.
8. **Watch for signs of fear and anxiety, children may not be able to put into words.** Has your child become extra clingy, needing more hugs and kisses than usual? Have your child's grades suddenly dropped? He may be feeling the pressure of what is going on in the world around him. Encourage him to write stories or draw pictures that show how he feels if he can't put his feelings into words.
9. **Enlist your child's help.** Just because your child is young does not mean she cannot do age-appropriate chores, such as setting the table or cleaning her room. Make sure your child knows how her actions contribute to the entire family's well-being. If your child knows that she has a role to play, and that she can help, she will feel more in control and more confident.
10. **Put things into a positive perspective.** Neither you nor your child may have been through a war before, but you should tell your child that wars end. Point out times when your child has faced up to and conquered something that may have frightened him, whether it was fear of the dark or of entering a new classroom for the first time. When you talk about bad times, make sure you talk about the good times in the future as well.

Resilience is a Journey

You can teach children resilience. But just because children learn resilience doesn't mean they won't have bad times. Bad times hurt, and children will have times when they aren't happy. Resilience is a journey, and each child will take his or her own time along the way, just as each child learns to read and write in his or her own time. Children may benefit from some of these resilience strategies, while other children may benefit from other strategies. The skills of resilience you teach children in a time of war will be useful to him or her even after war, and they are good skills to have in daily life.

You may feel that you need some help in teaching children resilience. If you are feeling stuck or overwhelmed and unable to use the tips listed above, you may want to consider talking to someone who can help, such as a psychologist or other mental health professional. Turning to someone for guidance may help you help a child strengthen his or her resilience and persevere in a time of war.

This information is brought to you by NH Operation: Military Kids
For further information Contact:

Wendy Brock
UNH Cooperative Extension,
4-H Youth Development
wend.brock@unh.edu
603-862-2180

Peter Merritt
NH National Guard,
Family Services
peter.merritt@nh.ngb.army.mil
603-227-1429