

There are two separate questions which children and their families face in the current Gulf Crisis. The first question deals with the family's definition of the crisis, the second to how the family prepares for the crisis that it has defined.

Nowhere is the interface between the society at large and the family more problematic than in the current situation. Children of all ages are exposed to an incessant barrage of "news" especially in the electronic media. These items are very hard to follow, their urgency and especially their certainty are often greatly exaggerated, and they flip-flop in their direction more than once a day. Statements of political leaders are not much more reliable or consistent. Children will naturally look to their parents for some guiding definitions of what on earth is really happening. While such a question would challenge many an adult in this country, I think that it is best that a family try to create its own version of reality in real time. The family version would be much more child-friendly if it could follow these eight principles:

1. The version is best decided upon jointly by all responsible adults.
2. The version is stated in the most clear and concrete terms, as the content of a family belief.
3. The version explicitly states its own time-limitation.
4. The version recognizes and in some way accounts for other opinions.
5. The WAY THE VERSION IS PRESENTED involves an expression of confidence that reflects the RESPONSIBILITY that the parents assume for the version.
6. The version is not for sale: stating it is for the purpose of clarifying a stance, not for the purpose of convincing anyone that this is the only credible version
7. The version be clearly and coherently linked to an explicitly stated plan of action.
8. The version states confidence that the family IS SAFE ENOUGH .The version can then examine itself, asking whether the children FEEL SAFE ENOUGH with the plan as stated. That way, children may make changes in the plan, not because they know better what IS SAFE, but because only they know when they FEEL SAFE.. Children need to rely on parents for the statement of real safety, but parents can respond to children's needs to feel safe without compromising their confidence in what is real safety.

Let me demonstrate two approaches that are different in content but that apply the same principles. The numbers in brackets refer to the numbered principles above.

"Daddy and I have been talking and we both believe [1] that there is no real chance of any attack on Israel. In other words, we are sure that we are all perfectly safe. [2] We think that is the best way to understand how things stand today. [3] We think that all the statements about dangers and about Israel not being prepared are ways of some people saying "we feel very frightened", but Daddy and I [1] are not frightened and do not think that being frightened is right for us all [5]. We are sure enough of our understanding [6] that we have decided that we will all just continue with life as usual for now.[7] Now you tell us if you also FEEL SAFE enough with this approach. If you FEEL that you need us to do something more so that you feel better, tell us. There is no harm in doing more than what Daddy and I think is needed, if it will help you to feel safer.[8]

"Mommy and I [1] think that we can all stay safe enough if we take seriously all the reports of possible war. As of today[3], we think that there is some possibility that we may need to protect ourselves, and we are sure that we can be protected enough.[2] We think that all the statements about nothing happening are a way of people saying "Let's hope nothing will happen". [4] But we feel that it is right for us [6] to get ourselves ready even if the chance of an attack is small. That way we all feel safe no

matter what [5]. So we are going to practice putting on gas masks to make ourselves comfortable and not frightened, and we will be making some changes in one room that we will tell you all about. [7] We are taking precautions, and we want to both be safe and to FEEL SAFE ENOUGH. So if some of what we are doing makes you feel scared, tell us, so we can all make a way to feel safe enough. [8]

The second question involves what can be planned in the case of attack that could help children to feel safe. This is hardly a trivial question, although to my taste it was often trivialized during the Gulf War (anyone still remember the "Drink water" advice?) Whatever plan is being made, it should be spelled out and practiced with children. I think the following principles would help:

A. Do things together. In addition to watching the news, plan Games for the Sealed Room (the card game WAR is an obvious selection) that provide the right level of distraction for your family.

B. Allow for expressions of aggression. Little children could dramatize what they would do with Saddam if they caught him. Older children could put him on trial. Children of all ages could engage in a sci-fi contest of what to do to Iraq.

C. Allow for expressions of fear. Distraction and aggression will not necessarily prevent fearfulness, nor should they. The main issue is to keep fears within the proportions of each child's ability to deal with them. This means a plan for what to do when you feel fear. Often a first measure is a measure. Children can state whether their fear is so big (fingers an inch apart) or so big (say a foot) or so big (an arm span). All measures cannot be bigger than the measurer, by virtue of his act of measuring. So this helps keep the child's confidence that the fear, while perhaps considerable, is "inside him," and therefore smaller than him. Other measures will include comforts like hugging, cuddlies that comfort, and for younger children taking care of the "fears" of their dolls.

D. Count time. While in the Sealed Room, the actual time for fear is quite small, since the warning time for a missile attack is so short. After a few minutes, state clearly that the danger of being near a missile is over, and the rest is precaution.

E. Allow for expressions of humor. Rituals that express a family's unique humorous response creates a feeling of togetherness and control. (During the Gulf War, my young children enjoyed making a "raspberry" for Saddam before putting on their masks).

F. Evaluate how your plan is working. Children can often make very useful suggestions for what would help them more.

One last point. The SCUD threat is more of a fantasy than reality for the vast majority of Israeli children. By this I mean that even worst case scenarios do not have more than a small proportion of children actually experiencing a physical threat to their safety. For some children who live their emotional lives more in fantasy than in reality, this seemingly optimistic fact is more of a burden than a blessing. So it is important to recognize and take seriously the experience of a child who is becoming anxious beyond what a realistic approach can contain. Such a child would need more directed help in channeling fantasy towards a solution to his fears. But above all, his fears should not be dismissed or expected or respond according to reason. That would only render such a vulnerable child all alone in his vulnerability. Such a situation led to some unhappy consequences during the Gulf War that could have been avoided. And please keep in mind that such children may have their Gulf War experiences reawakened by the current crisis, even if the end nothing happens in reality. Something has already happened in fantasy.