

Walking With Teens in Times of Military Conflict: A Pastoral Guide for Those Working with Youth, Especially Youth Who Have Loved Ones Involved in Conflict

By Mark Moitoza

A New Presence of Mind

Military troops involved in conflict have ramifications beyond those that are seen on the 24-hour news-cycle. We know active duty military and reserves are in danger during a conflict. The families and loved ones of these individuals are also personally involved. A spouse, a parent, a child, a relative or even a young person who is a friend of someone in a military family can experience increased fear, anxiety and stress before, during and after the conflict. While fear of the unknown affects all of us, adult leaders are invited to a new presence of mind, reflection and prayer about the ways they may respond with genuine pastoral concern to young people directly affected by the very real actions of this conflict.

- Read the news and learn about the military culture in times of conflict.
- Learn and understand military language and acronyms.
- Use the news to physically map out what is really happening.
- If you are near a military base or post, consult the Catholic chaplain on base or post to find out how he helps the community of faith during this difficult time.
- Know your limits. Create a resource list of professional medical and mental health counselors.
- Seek advice from military chaplains for addressing such tragedies as having a loved one either missing in action (MIA) or killed in action (KIA).
- Be compassionate.

Guidelines for a Group Discussion

In addition to forming a new presence of mind, it will be important to create an opportunity for honest and open discussion among the young people in your care. Such discussion does not increase fear. Rather it allows young people to vent what they are thinking and offer the chance to be heard. A small-group setting can provide an appropriate atmosphere for youth to share what they think and feel about the conflict. During such a small-group initial responses may include inappropriate humor, statements of "American military might" or even a reluctance to share. Patience, compassion and encouragement are needed skills to help break through these barriers. Allow youth to share what they really think without criticizing them or telling them that everything is going to be okay. Some young people may even express the desire to be a part of the conflict since they have a parent or friends who are actively involved. Some young people may feel left behind because they are not part of the action. What is needed is a ministry of presence, a ministry of listening and an

invitation to pray and learn more about what the Catholic Church teaches about war and peace. The following principles can be critical while facilitating a discussion:

- Create a safe and caring environment to honestly share thoughts and feelings.
- Be compassionate.
- Listen well. Do not pretend to know all of the answers to their concerns.
- High school youth will talk about issues relating to politics, ethics, social injustice and concern for the innocent. Their focus will tend to move towards the global issues because the personal issues hit too close to home.
- Allow for disagreements and different points of view in your discussions.
- Encourage youth to allow others to have different opinions.
- Respect a young person's desire not to share. He or she may just need to hear what others are voicing.
- Be aware that terrorism and war often provide the opportunity to discuss prejudices, stereotyping, aggression and nonviolent solutions.
- Be aware that the world situation can encourage youth to reflect and re-examine their life priorities.
- Reassure fears by helping youth to cope with those fears.

The following can provide a structure for a small group discussion:

Mapping the Journey of a Loved One in Conflict

Preparation: Using your local newspaper or news Web site, gather current information about military personnel from your community, state, or closest military installation. More information may be available from the military installation Web site links.

The vision of this opening exercise is to track and trace the journey of these troops alongside our journey of faith in order to facilitate a group discussion. This exercise helps to broaden the depth of understanding among the young people in your care. It also helps to reiterate the fact that these troops are not isolated or alone.

Opening: Welcome the young people to your small-group setting. Begin with a brief introduction highlighting, in your own words, the reality of the conflict, the deployment of troops, the personal connection to your community and the need to pray for all people involved in this conflict.

Prayer: Lord, we gather together to share our thoughts and feelings. Help us to seek your presence in the midst of this conflict. Guide us as we struggle to

understand and pray for all the people who are involved. We pray all of this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Activity: In the small-group setting draw an outline map of the USA (Europe or Asia if you are stationed overseas) and the area of the conflict on newsprint or poster board. Invite the youth to use the information you have gathered (from newspapers, Web sties, and so on) to track the journey of the troops in your community from their home base to their deployed location. It helps, visually, to actually connect the two locations with a magic marker. Creating this map offers a focal point for your discussion. It also enables youth who have a loved one involved in this conflict to plot out that journey on this group map too. Locations may vary due to different deployment assignments. If news sources provide information on the mission of the troops you are charting it would be good to include that mission on your map as well.

Your map could have the following plotted and connected points:

Home Base-----Deployed Base-----Potential Mission
Parent Home Base----Parent Deployed Base----Parent Potential Mission
Friend Home Base-----Friend Deployed Base----Friend Potential Mission

Discussion Questions: Using the map as your focal point, ask the group both personal and spiritual questions regarding this conflict. Depending on the group it may be worthwhile to offer some quiet reflection time for young people to write out their answers to these questions before you begin the discussion.

Personal Questions:

- What fears or worries do you have regarding this conflict?
- What questions do you have about this conflict that keeps nagging at you?
- What do you need to help you cope with all that is going on right now?

Spiritual Questions:

- Where is God in the midst of these journeys on our map?
- Who is supporting our troops in this conflict?
 - a) deployed military chaplains
 - b) military chaplains on base helping troops and families at home
 - c) the community of faith praying for all of those involved in this conflict
- How can the experiences of being without a parent or friend during this time help you and your family, grow in faith?
- How can prayer help you stay connected while you are here and your loved one is there?

- What are some realistic ways that you can connect with your loved one while they are deployed?
 - a) e-mail
 - b) phone (when he or she calls home)
 - c) letters
 - d) prayer, both personal and communal

A Guide for Talking One-on-One about the War

In addition, care provided in a group circumstance may warrant more individual attention. Adolescents may display signs of fear or anxiety indicating a need for such care. Such fears and anxieties may include fear for the parent or friends that are deployed, worrying about death, concern of future terrorist responses with military bases as targets, dealing with people they know who become missing in action (MIA) or killed in action (KIA), fear of innocent people dying, and wanting to know exactly when the war will end. As you minister to these young people the following signs may indicate a need for one-on-one conversations:

- non-verbal cues
- withdrawal from friends and school
- irritable or rebellious behavior
- promiscuity or drug or alcohol use
- declined interest in academic performance

Keep in mind the need these young people have for support, someone to listen, the ability to be honest, a sense of security, friends, prayer, a desire to share their thoughts throughout the conflict and afterwards. Some young people will use the "issues of conflict" as an excuse for putting their life on hold. That is to say, they will stop engaging in normal, healthy daily activities. While an initial feeling of being overwhelmed is certainly normal, allowing those fears to halt everyday life is not. If possible, help young people to not be controlled or immobilized by their fears.

If a young person who shows signs of anxiety during the small-group discussion, keep the following in mind:

Consider approaching him or her sometime after the group setting. You might start by letting him or her know that you were really interested in his or her concerns. You may indicate that you would like to learn more about what their loved one is doing in the conflict. You could also say: "You said something important that I wanted to ask you about." All of this opens the opportunity to ask more specific questions so that the young person can be heard on a deeper level.

One-on-One Questions:

- Ask the young person where his or her loved one is deployed and when he or she last heard from them.
- Invite the young person to tell you what he or she knows about the deployed mission of his or her loved one (some will have a sense of this and others will have no idea - both responses are normal).
- Ask the young person what concerns him or her most about this conflict.
- Ask the young person what he or she thinks could help them cope with this difficult time (you may need to help them create a tangible framework of support, care and prayer that would help to meet these needs).

Care for Families

It is also important to offer the families your support:

- Encourage the parent who is left alone to take care of their children. Offer him or her some free time by taking their children out to dinner.
- Sports or other extra-curricular activities, including involvement in religious activities, should be encouraged since they add structure to everyday life.
- Encourage parents to set firm behavior limits.
- Help the parent foster responsibility for the young person at home. This can make the young person feel more needed.
- Be aware of those in your community that have experienced a personal tragedy as a result of this conflict.
- Be prepared to offer assistance to families in need.

Comprehensive youth ministry strives to understand the culture that young people and their families are living in. Good pastoral care with youth and families that have loved ones involved in conflict needs the same attention. The more you know about the current events of this conflict and the military culture the better equipped you will be to offer a sense of companionship with those involved with this journey.

Bullet point items are based on suggestions from the following sources: "What to do when Mom and Dad go to War," *The Stars and Stripes Newspaper - European Edition*, Sunday, January 19, 2003, pages 12-13; "The Emotional Cycle of Deployment: A Military Family Perspective," *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal*, April -June 2001, www.hooah4health.com; www.aboutourkids.org/articles/war.html, "Talking to Kids About Terrorism or Acts of War," by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

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