

So, You Have to Talk About War?

Tips from Linda Granfield

author of *The Road to Afghanistan*, *Remembering John McCrae*
and *The Unknown Soldier*

We can't ignore war.

It is on screen in our family rooms and commercial theatres, on billboards – in our media outlets of every kind. Kids play highly sophisticated video games. Music, art, comic books, the evening news – children around the world hear about and see war daily.

Let's face it – nobody wants to just sit on a comfortable couch with a child and talk about a subject like war. Snacks and milk don't make the job any easier, either. And it is *a job* to discuss war, death or any other difficult topic that is part of our lives. But maybe a child you know has asked you about war. What now?

Here are some things to consider before, during and after your discussion.

- Don't run away from the topic when you've been asked. The child is asking because something has provoked his or her question. You may need to educate *yourself* about the topic before trying to explain it. Meanwhile, you can acknowledge and ask about the child's concerns, in order to buy some time to gather more information yourself.
- Remember that there is no pat answer – and saying “war is terrible” and “no one should take part” can lead to other questions, such as, “So why did Grandad fight?” Educate yourself on the causes – there is plenty of information available in libraries and online. (You may wish to refer to the Canadian Children's Book Centre's List of World War I and World War II books attached for a selection of good reading materials.)
- Look to your own family history for help with a war discussion. Who in your family is/was a veteran? A wartime nurse? Share what facts you know about these veterans. (Don't forget that much of our family history during wartime comes from those – usually women – who stayed at home and provided other war services of great importance: farming, sewing/knitting, making parachutes, and so on). People at home might have experienced rationing, conscription and victory bond drives, or might have collected tin, sent Red Cross packages, written/emailed soldiers in the field, and so on.

- Display photographs and medals of your family's veterans all year, not just on Remembrance Day. The visibility and familiarity of these pieces provides comfort, making them part of family discussions any time of the year.
- Remember that veterans were not always in wars in the way children might imagine. Many were stretcher bearers, doctors, medics, clerks, radio operators, cooks, engineers and so on. Children might ask what they did and how that supported the fighting troops. Their experiences can be interesting to children as well.
- Watch for opportunities to speak to the veterans in your community. Remember that not all veterans have children to share their life stories with, and many may be willing to share. Be open to those in your neighbourhood who might want to talk about their experiences with your family.
- Contact your local Royal Canadian Legion Branch and ask if there is a veteran you can invite to your child's classroom.
- Many of the veterans of the war in Afghanistan are young – only in their twenties and thirties, and some of these veterans are women. They might enjoy visiting your child's classroom. **IMPORTANT TIP:** It's worth taking time off from work to be there yourself when a veteran visits the school. **YOU** will come away with more insights about real conflict and be more up to the task when asked, "Why is there war?"
- If you have trouble knowing what to say to a veteran, remember that discussing war is not all about killing. It isn't. It's also about people helping one another, providing for others, bringing out the best in each other. More than one veteran has told me that surviving the war was due to good training, a good sense of humour and good luck. You will find stories that reflect all three points.
- As a caregiver, become aware of those in the school or community who have come to Canada from war-torn countries. There is much to learn from chats with new Canadians. Often, these children will not feel they can open up about what they've experienced unless they know it is okay to talk about war. I recall a specific time I visited a school for Remembrance Day discussions and learned that after I left one child decided to share her experiences of living in Bosnia during the conflict there. Her classmates were riveted – and warmly understanding. This was ground-breaking for the girl and the other students.

- Try not to make children feel that world peace can be achieved if only *they* try hard enough. This is unrealistic, and I've heard it suggested too many times. Helping children achieve peace on a more manageable scale is more important: no bullying in the schoolyard, no pinching or yelling at the dinner table, more sharing of possessions.
- Channel some of their youthful energy into digging and planting a Remembrance Garden in your yard or the school/community centre grounds. Plant bulbs in the autumn that will come into bloom in April for Vimy Ridge Day: a nice symbol of new life and new attitudes.
- Put a poppy drawing in your window, *not* just in November —you'll be surprised how much interesting and helpful discussion results from this action alone.