*Ellen Seiter/Megan Pincus*

# A protective silence

## US children and the Iraq War

**In the US media parents were called upon to protect their children from media reports. Parents and teachers avoided talking to children about the subject. Accordingly American children's knowledge about the war seemed to be full of gaps. Their ideas about military action almost resembled stories in comics and many questions remained unanswered.**

United States media coverage addressing parents of young children and adolescents during the 2003 Iraq War was full of "expert advice" about protecting youth and keeping them unscathed by unfolding global events. News stories in newspapers, on television, and via national wire services followed a similar format, advising parents on ways to shield children from the war, which was usually characterised as a distant event made relevant only by escalating fears of terrorist attacks in the United States. Our small empirical study indicates that adults rarely spoke to children about the war, except to alleviate their fears and reassure them about their safety. Unlike the more sophisticated and informed perspectives of children in Israel and Germany (see Lemish and Götz in this issue), American children were frustrated by their lack of information about the war and by adult reticence on the topic. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that virtually no television news programmes for children are broadcast on US television. There was unilateral agreement in the press, however, that the proper course of action for adults was to help children to stop thinking about the war and to minimise their exposure to TV news coverage, such as that on CNN.

### Expert Advice

Nationally, a core group of child experts, from child-centred organisations and institutions such as universities and children's hospitals, reappeared on different media outlets. Spokespeople for the US non-profit organisations KidsPeace, Educators for Social Responsibility, Scholastic Publishing and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) were often quoted, as were doctors from Children's Hospital Boston and several university professors/authors. In press releases sent over various national wire services most of these national experts were featured advertising their expertise and willingness to talk to media on this issue. Locally and regionally, reporters also called on local child psychologists and professors and quoted them in articles on children and the war. Parents themselves became the secondary experts, and subjects, of many news stories, as they described the questions and behaviours of their own children. Almost exclusively, US media coverage about children during the Iraq War focussed on US children, with only rare mentions of Iraqi children and the effects of war on them. Differentiations were made between US children who were "directly involved" with the war (i. e. had parents or other close family members deployed) and children who were not directly involved with the conflict but were experiencing it primarily through the media. It is the latter group on which we focus in this project.

Akin to the issue of television and violence in the United States, the subject of children and war appears, on the surface, to cross party political lines – or, at least, a common "protect the children" mission often masks politics. As one professor told a major newspaper: "Childhood should be a time when things are innocent and sweet and nice. So we want to protect our children."[1] The often-quoted experts provided tip lists for parents with only slight variations between them; in general there was no clear-cut "conservative" or "liberal" view on the matter. Questions about children from US reporters and parents were presented as urgent and were often redundant – how to talk to them about war, how to know if they need professional psychological help, how to behave around them during wartime, how to understand their play or comments. Several common themes crossed nearly every list of tips and words of wisdom from the experts, most of which were headlined with advice to parents to "turn off the TV" and not overexpose young, impressionable minds to constant war coverage.

## "Turn off the TV!"

Nearly every list of tips for parents told them to limit children's exposure to televised images of the war. "Turn it off!" directed experts from Georgetown University, Save the Children, Yale Child Study Centre, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and many other organisations. "Ask local stations and newspapers to limit the repetition of particularly disturbing and dramatic scenes," said one child psychologist, whose recommendations were "endorsed by the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill."[2] "There is too much media on this war!" Phil McGraw, a popular psychologist known as "Dr. Phil" with his own syndicated daily talk show and a tremendous following, proclaimed during one of his wartime broadcasts, to thunderous applause from his studio audience. He concluded: "Technology has outstripped common sense and morality. I think that's not good for our children and not good for us."[3] Throughout all of the stories, experts advised parents to deal with children "age-appropriately", explaining that the younger the children, the less they would understand about war and the more protection they would need from television and war talk. For older children and teenagers, the experts said, it is important for parents to watch the coverage with children, to open up dialogue, and to answer questions.

A few voices of dissent spoke to the overwhelming "Turn it off!" rhetoric. Scholastic Publishing, top publisher of "age-appropriate" classroom magazines and materials for children, sent out a press release reporting that an online poll on the Scholastic website showed that 61% of respondents (presumably school-age children) believed that the amount of media coverage of the war was appropriate.[4] One editorial in *USA Today*, by a writer for progressive National Public Radio (NPR) and mainstream *Parenting Magazine*, decried the overwhelming advice circulating to parents to turn off the television. "I couldn't disagree more," he wrote. "The world is a messy place and our kids know it. But if we watch them closely enough – if we let them air their own thoughts, form their own arguments and paint their own signs – maybe one day they can gently guide us to a time and place where things aren't quite so messy anymore."[5] Then again, back at NPR, a prestigious Yale University professor advised: "Turn the television set off and sit down and just have a family chat."[6] Television networks also had financial interests in combating the "Turn off the TV!" rhetoric, so many began to advertise "war-free TV" for children. At least one broadcast and five cable networks announced kids' programming blocks that were a "safe haven" and a "place to escape" for children during the US-Iraq conflict.[7]

## Monitor behaviour – yours and theirs

The experts also offered much advice on monitoring behaviour during the war – both children's behaviour and the behaviour of parents themselves. Watching and listening to children's talk and play was a major theme. In terms of children's talk, experts told parents to "listen to your children carefully." A press release from Save the Children, for example, suggested: "Before responding, get a clear picture of what they understand. Trauma results in part when a child cannot give meaning to dangerous experiences. Find out what he or she understands about war and terrorism."[8] Continually, advice stressed asking children what they know before offering any information, and taking care not to give children more information than they ask for. This particular strategy is widely suggested as an approach to the topic of sexuality with children. When parents do explain the war, experts advise, they should keep answers "age-appropriate" and simple. "Look at their level of understanding," said Dr. Phil. "For kindergarten, that is 'good' and 'bad'." War, to these children, Dr. Phil explains, means that people "didn't use their words." Soldiers are 'heroes', Saddam Hussein is a 'bad' man – these simple terms are recommended again and again for parents of young children.

As for children's play: "Be an observer, not a spoiler," reported the *Boston Globe*. "When children have something on their mind, they let us know they need to talk about it through their play," a preschool director told the paper.[9] Within children's play and everyday behaviours, parents are advised by the experts to look for common "signs of stress". "Any significant changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, concentration, wide emotional swings or frequent physical complaints without apparent illness," are cited as signs that children need the professional help of a therapist or counsellor, a common question for many parents.[10] According to one psychiatrist, quoted in the newspaper *USA Today*, "the demand for therapy to help anxious children surged after 9/11, followed by a lull last year, and it's been going up again in recent weeks as the war gets more attention."[11] Experts spent much time advising parents on the signs that meant they should take their kids to a psychotherapist.

Parents were also tutored to monitor their *own* behaviour in order to protect their children from further emotional stress or trauma. "If they see Mom or Dad afraid of snakes, they'll be afraid of snakes," one psychiatrist told the national magazine *TV Guide*. "If they see Mom or Dad shocked and horrified, they will be, too."[12] So, said the experts, parents should remain calm. "Don't pass on your angers and fears," advised Save the Children.


Fig. 1: **In Ryan's drawing an American tank is going to Iraq and sees Saddam's warriors. It is crushing them, shooting them, finally throwing them up in the air and destroying them with a missile. Behind the barrel of the gun one can see the different parts of Saddam's torn body.**

"Handle your own emotions constructively," one local paper instructed.[13] "A child will learn so much by modelling your feelings," said Dr. Brazelton, child expert for the NBC broadcasting network. "You can gently talk to children about your own fears so that they can see that you can face them and carry on."[14] Experts advised parents to limit their own TV watching and to avoid engaging in any heated, adult conversations about the war until after children have gone to sleep. A couple of experts, although not the majority, warned parents to monitor their own use of stereotypes or slurs when discussing the war around children.

## Reassure children of their safety

For younger children, the unanimous advice offered by the US media was to reassure them about their safety without lying to them about the circumstances. "Assure them about all that is being done to protect them and their family, internationally and within this country," said the popular Save the Children tip list, quoted in several newspapers. "Make sure they know they are being protected." Again and again, experts advised parents to tell US children that the war is very far away. Qualifying this in light of terrorism in the United States, the experts also warned parents not to lie to children or flippantly tell them not to worry or that nothing will happen. "Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you are 'making things up'," one expert said. "It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future."[15] Remain positive, be reassuring but honest, and repeat these messages, parents of young children were advised. Said Linda Ellerbee, journalist and host of *NickNews* for children, the only child-centred news programme in the US media: "You have to keep reminding kids that there are still more good people in the world than bad, and that all of the good people in the world want to protect kids."[16]

Beyond talking, keeping children in a normal routine – going to soccer practice, going to school or after-school programmes – was also advised as a method of protecting children from war anxiety and reassuring them that their lives would not be affected. On the flip side, several also recommended that parents should help children participate in the war effort, to somehow become active rather than helpless in the situation. "Teaching children to participate in their world helps to break the fear," one parent told the *Christian Science Monitor*. "They will feel less defenceless and gain a sense of empowerment."[17] This parental philosophy was echoed by many of the experts, who recommended that parents encourage and join children in volunteering, writing letters, or attending rallies. Some experts also recommended using maps or newspaper stories to engage children and teens who are interested in understanding and discussing the war actively. However, US media coverage overwhelmingly portrayed images and stories of children "supporting the troops" – sending letters and care packages, waving flags – as the main activity to involve children in the war effort and reassure them of their safety.

## Method

The US component of the study "Children watching the war in Iraq" is part of a larger, longitudinal study of children's media preferences and use of the Internet.[18] The findings derive from a classroom ethnography of an after-school computer class in which children produce a quarterly newsletter. The children were interviewed in best-friend pairs. Thus, the environment was familiar, outside of normal school routines or parental supervision, and the children and interviewer had a lengthy acquaintance, sometimes as much as three years.


Fig. 2: **Rohwa's drawing shows a newscaster sitting on a chair. In the lower part it says: "The USA won, or did Iraq?" In the upper corner there is an American soldier pointing with his handgun at a man who is lying on the ground.**

While the findings are not generalisable, more contextual information is available about the US children than about the German and Israeli students because of the difference in design. It should be noted that these respondents were working-class, and ethnically and racially diverse, attending a school that is pejoratively termed "low performing" in the school district.

The 22 children interviewed for the US study were between 8 and 11 years of age; 13 boys and 9 girls. The sample is very small, however, these children share with other US children the experience of adult reticence on the topic of war. The children volunteered several reasons why they thought their teachers were avoiding the subject: because they had a lot of work to do in school, because they didn't want the children to worry about it, because it was too difficult to explain. The interviews betray a callous attitude in that the war is seen to inconvenience them only by interrupting their scheduled TV programmes for news breaks. Many children reported switching to a cable channel such as *Nickelodeon* to avoid any further war news.

The most enthusiastic participants in the exercise were the Anglo-American (Caucasian) boys, who made up a minority of students in the class, which was primarily Latino (40 %) and African-American (40 %).

All boys were more outspoken than girls about their opinions on the war, and tended to be enthusiastically pro-combat. The boys mostly conceived of the war as a personalised conflict between George Bush and Saddam Hussein, one that had involved a series of verbal threats and warnings by the United States. When Saddam Hussein ignored these, he deserved the kind of beating he would receive in return. In this scenario, there was no consideration for the Iraqi civilians or military, although US servicemen figured heavily. War and soldiers are the focus of the drawings (see Fig. 1).


Fig. 3: **Nicole wants to see peace on television instead of violence.**

Girls were evenly divided between pro- and anti-war positions, but were quite conscious of the civilian casualties of war, and the hardships on the Iraqi people. While the boys embraced the opportunity to portray war in their drawings, the girls preferred the "what would you like to see on television?" part of the assignment, and every one of them carefully drew a scene close to television's visual representations, usually a newscaster, announcing either the end of the war or the decision to halt the war for humanitarian reasons (see Fig. 2 and 3). They included in their drawings lots of bloodshed, weaponry and scatological allusions. There was also a great deal of captioning, and multiple scenes (some of them sequential, some simultaneous) depicted in each of the boys' drawings. The war is represented akin to a playground fight, with cheers and laughter by the victors. Strikingly different from the high technology warfare featured on TV, knives were the preferred weapon in the boys' drawings, and decapitation a recurring cause of death, with attention to the detail of blood dripping. Decapitations were disturbingly common and seemed to echo the box cutters used to slit some of the air passengers' throats during the September 11 attacks, only this time Saddam Hussein himself was getting his throat slit. None of the children explicitly mentioned September 11, however. In the boys' minds there was no possibility of US failure at that point in time (April 2003) and far less anxiety expressed about the war than in the girls' interviews.

Sean is an 11-year-old red-headed boy, whose mother is a clerical worker and father is a construction worker. In school, Sean is articulate and confident, always the first to answer questions in class. He occasionally gets in trouble for fighting with or pushing other students, and he keeps his distance from the African-American and Latino students in the class. Sean describes his drawing (see Fig. 4):

Sean: That's Saddam. Those are bullets. That's some guy taking a pee and he gets stabbed and, um, someone shoots off his head. Like, we do this, attack his kids and his family

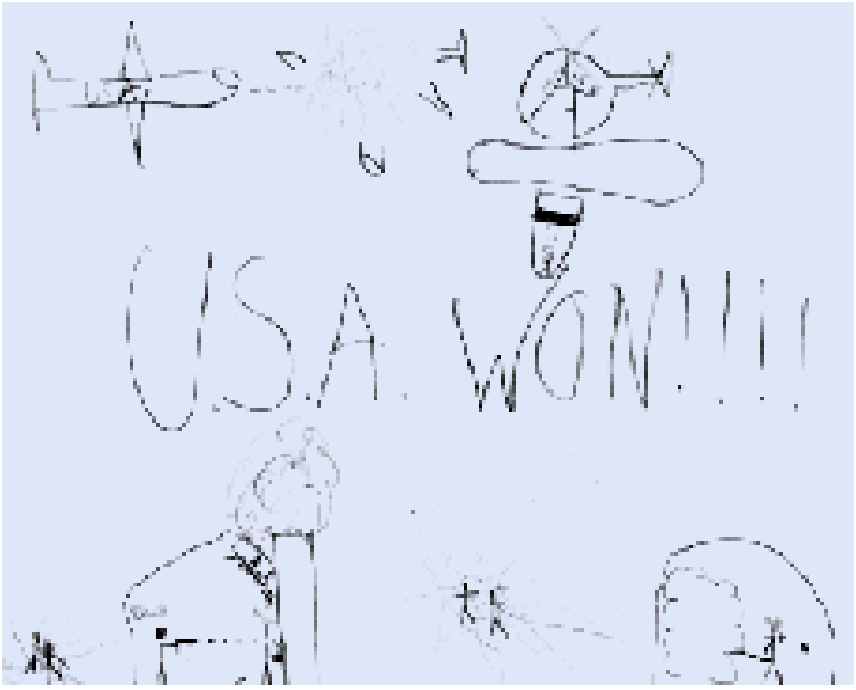


Fig. 4: **In Sean's drawing the USA are shown as the victorious power. The American airforce destroys the Iraqi air planes. On the ground one man – taking a pee – gets stubbed and someone shoots off his head. Bush himself shoots at Saddam with a machine gun.**

and another kid and him, and Bush [comes?] in with a machine gun and up there we're destroying the air force planes and right there US is inside a 'copter and destroying it and it says "US Won!". That's what I'd like.

Ellen: That's what you'd like to see?

Sean: Yeah. And then right here is a description of Bush killing him. So this is like Saddam and then, um, uh, he's dying, he's dead, because of the honourable thing that George W. Bush has done. Honouring him. A very precious moment in history.

Like all the boys in our study, Sean disavows any fears about his own safety. When the threat of attack on the US is raised, Sean switches to the fundamentalist Christian register he is familiar with from church. He says that he knows he is going to heaven to be with Jesus, so he does not need to worry.

At the other end of the spectrum are interviews with girls who adopt a unilateral anti-war position. Girls tended to discuss the painful effects of war and to imagine the women and children suffering in Iraq. This was the case with most of the Latin- and African-American girls in the class, who seemed more willing to adopt an anti-Bush position. Peace signs and hand shaking appear in the drawings. In this interview with Aurora, she was so reluctant to participate that I had to call her over, and by this time her friends had left the table. This may be why she was the only one who, rather than competitively displaying her knowledge of the war, or arguing over facts, revealed some of her confusion. Her reticence was typical of all the immigrant children in the class, who seemed wary about others overhearing, and possibly disagreeing with their position. This was part of a larger pattern of keeping a low profile at school. Aurora was an exceptionally good student, who often translated from English to Spanish for her parents and her large number of siblings. She constantly sought out adult approval and one-on-one attention. She had an extremely good memory and was very hard working.

Ellen: O.K., now tell me about your picture. Who's this?

Aurora: A soldier.

Ellen: And what does it say?

Aurora: It says "No more war" because a lot of people are getting killed, innocent people. And there's a soldier shooting and people are saying "No more war" because a lot of people are dying. […] I got a question, if Saddam destroyed the Two …

Ellen: World Trade … the two towers?

Aurora: Yeah.

Ellen: No, that was Osama Bin Laden.

(Pause)

Ellen: So tell me what this word is. Oh, that's his gun firing off. So, this is what you want to see on TV?

Aurora: Mmhm. No more war.

The boys and the girls seemed to share considerable confusion about the facts of the war. Often details were attributed to the wrong side in the conflict. Almost none of the children mentioned the nuclear threat as an impetus for the war – an omission that in retrospect seems less ill-informed today than it did in April 2003. Instead of eliminating weapons, they saw the war as an attempt to kill Saddam Hussein because he is an unfair leader, and cruel to his own people. The children considered the war primarily as a rescue operation for the Iraqis, and a punishment for Saddam for being so selfish and greedy. This perspective had been advanced months ahead of the war in some of their required school reading, the free publications *Scholastic Jr*. and *Time for Kids*. An unintended consequence for teachers may be that these materials, which are strongly supportive of the Bush government's position on Iraq, are likely to be the exclusive source of information available to children, in the absence of children's news programmes or political discussions with parents and teachers.

## Conclusion

In comparison to the German and Israeli children interviewed shortly af-

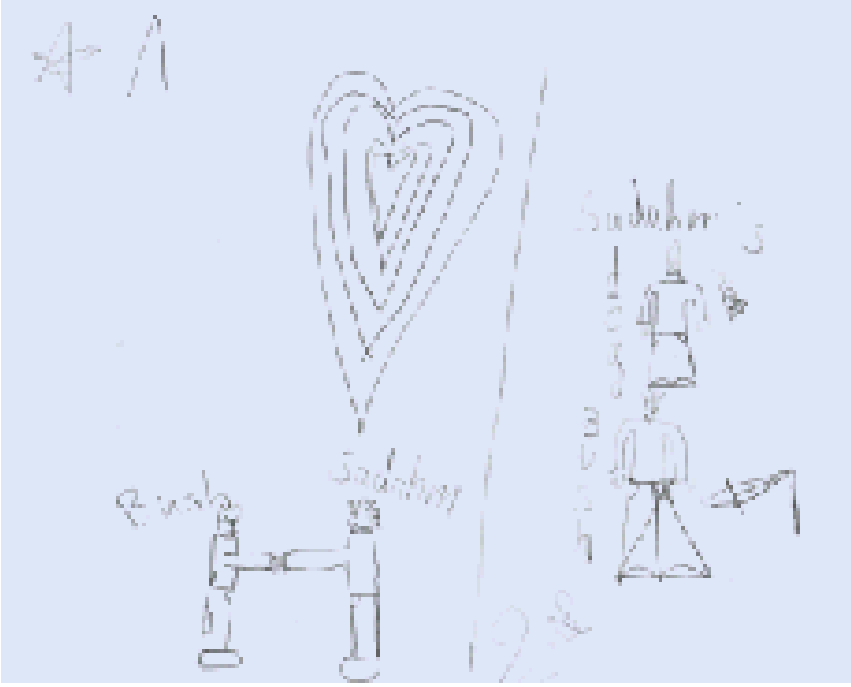

Fig. 5: **Sean drew a split screen: On the left side George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein shake hands beneath a heart - on the right side Saddam is decapitated by Bush's sword.**

ter the war, US children were more likely to take a cartoonish view of the violence, to see the war in terms of a personal clash between Bush and Hussein. The lack of any serious questions about the war, or attention to the moral dimensions of violence and its effects can be attributed to the promotion, in the press, of a mental health perspective on children's reaction to the war. Parents and teachers are encouraged, by experts ranging from child psychologists to Department of Defence literature, to sustain children's routines and eliminate references to the war at home and during the school day. Children are not viewed as subjects of political socialisation, or as capable of voicing opinions as citizens, resulting in a much stronger pro-war sentiment than in countries with strong peace education and protest traditions such as Germany.

For American children, many questions are left unanswered, as is apparent when Sean expresses his frustration with the limited knowledge about the war he gains from his (apparently pro-war) parents. Even after he has drawn violent pictures of Saddam Hussein's and Iraqi soldiers' deaths, he admits, at the end of the interview, that he does not understand why the war is necessary:

"Like when they shook [hands] on the peace and stuff … I don't get why he just doesn't do that. My mom says: '… it's just not that simple.' And I say: 'Why not?' And they say [mimicking parents]: 'It's just not.' And I go: 'Well, let's try.'"

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## THE AUTHORS

Ellen Seiter is Professor of Critical Studies at the School of Cinema-TV, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA. Her book "The Internet Playground" is forthcoming in 2004 from Peter Lang.

Megan Pincus is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego, USA.