

Helping Children Deal with Terrorism

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Exposure to violence in any form, whether directly or indirectly witnessed leaves children feeling frightened, unsafe, vulnerable and at times hopeless. Most children exhibit temporary behaviors that are characteristic of younger children. Children react with a wide variety of feelings and behaviors. Some children experience worrying, and bad memories that go away. Others have long term reactions. Some children who are acutely affected need to have adults stay with them until they feel more stable. It is important to remember that visual images are more terrifying than talking. The best way for a child to learn about what has happened is by talking with parents.

Preschoolers

Although most preschoolers should be shielded from television news, some mature and emotionally stable preschoolers may be able to look at a few pictures with their parents available to help interpret what is being seen and to answer questions. However, most preschoolers are very concrete and visual images are too powerful and intense for them. Preschoolers need parents to remind them that they are safe and that adults are in charge. Children may become fearful of separating from parents. Some may return to sucking their thumbs, or wetting their beds, or being afraid of the dark. Information should be given in short doses along with reassurance.

School Age Children

Young children are afraid that they will be separated from their family. They are afraid that they will be injured or killed. They are afraid that the event will happen again. They are afraid that they will be left alone. In times of crisis, school aged children need parents to watch very short television clips with them and be available to answer questions and discuss what is being viewed. Fearful, immature children or children who have recently experienced a death or crisis should not watch television. Children at this age also need to know that they are safe and that everyone is working to keep them safe. Make sure that you correct fantasy reactions or explanations of what has happened. Children may replay the events with toys just as adults tell and retell their own story. It is the same phenomenon and is normal.

Activities are important for this age group to keep children involved in their regular routines. Children may play out events, draw pictures or use toys to recreate the events. Extreme withdrawal may be noted, inappropriate behaviors and acting out, or have difficulty paying attention may be reported. Children may complain of stomach aches or headaches, or not want to come to school. Allow and encourage questions about their personal safety. More mature middle school children may need to do something to help.

Adolescents

Watch television with adolescents unless they are at risk and emotionally vulnerable. For adolescents, reading and discussing the events of the day are safe ways for them to be informed. Make sure that time is set aside to talk with adolescents, and talk in depth. Ask them to share their reactions and feelings honestly and listen to what they say. Adolescents may need to ask many difficult questions about why the events happened and parents need to inform themselves as they inform their older children. Adolescents may withdraw or become confused, they may feel intense anger or depression. They react much as adults would react. Adults need to be careful but honest, about expressing their own feelings. Even older children need to feel that their immediate world is safe and that parents are in charge, trying to protect them.

Signs that Some Children may Need Help

National tragedies and national disasters shake the stability of most people. This experience is very stressful and threatening. It is different than other kinds of trauma in that trust is shaken and people become aware that anything can happen. Action most likely occurred without warning, destruction may be widespread and events happen quickly. These factors generate widespread stress, anxiety, fear and anger.

The media has made the world smaller. Television, radio, newspapers and the Internet overwhelm watchers with details and graphic images. These images are repeated over and over. Simply watching the repeated segments can result in acute stress reactions. Children feel the same emotions and reactions that their parents and teachers may feel, but they have less experience in dealing with intense feelings. They have had less time to develop strategies for dealing with trauma.

Emotional reactions vary from child to child. Previous experience, temperament and personality determine a student's reaction. Reactions depend on how close the crisis was to the child. A child's reaction also depends on age. Children understand that death is permanent by age 9 and may react with more distress or shock than younger children. Children by this age know that if something happened to others it could also happen in their neighborhood, to their families and to them. Children may begin to react and deal with events in small chunks. They may ask questions now and then. They may play out the events they have seen on television. Children often appear as if they have forgotten about or gotten over trauma when they are still trying to deal with it because they do not tolerate intense emotional pain as well as adults.

Some children are at more risk than others when tragedy strikes. Children who have recently experienced personal stress will react more strongly. Children who are less stable emotionally may react more strongly. If a child has ever visited the site of the disaster may experience more stress. Children may not react initially and only later begin to develop symptoms of stress. >

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Because the recent events have affected almost everyone, we can expect that every child will have to deal with the events at some level. It is almost impossible to protect children completely from the recent events and what may happen in the future.

Children need to be told that they have permission to experience feelings around the events whenever they are ready to do so. They may need some help with the word to describe not only feelings but also the events that occurred. Children need to talk about what they have heard just as adults talk about what has happened after a disaster. Talking and asking questions should be encouraged at home and parents need to answer children's questions simply and honestly. Parents need to remember that they do not have to have all of the answers and it is okay to say "I don't have an answer", and "I just don't know".

Signs that children may need help dealing with their reactions to violence include aggressive behavior following exposure to actual or secondary violence. Repeated nightmares, a numb feeling, startle reactions or statements of hopelessness are additional signs. Watch for bad dreams, nightmares, or other sleep disturbances. Watch for persistent fears, irritability, startle reactions and physical complaints. Watch for preoccupation with the events either by talking about the events or repeatedly acting them out in play.

Watch for changes in behavior, somatic complaint, increased sensitivity and inability to concentrate that goes on too long (more than a week or two). Watch for lack of interest in usual activities and anger statements. Adults need to be careful about making negative statements. Children may generalize the comments and learn prejudiced reactions to groups of people who appear to be different.

Suggestions for Parents

1. Spend time with children after a crisis or trauma. Set aside time to talk with them. Read books, listen to music, take walks and ride bikes with your children. Older children and mature children may need to do something to help and parents can help them think of ways to be helpful.
2. Parents' reaction to a violent event or a disaster strongly influences children's ability to deal with the event. A parent's fear tells the child that the danger is real and may affect them. Parents who are depressed or anxious or who react strongly, need to get help for themselves before dealing with their children.
3. Routines are critical for children. If daily routines are disrupted, children will become anxious and react with greater emotion. Give children chores to do. Having a job to do helps children understand that everything will be okay. Routines tell children that they are safe. Routines give children a sense of safety and security.
4. If your child feels frightened, your child is afraid. Perceptions are real for children. Reassure your child immediately. Tell children who in the family is safe. Let your child know that it is okay to feel stressed, sad or upset.
5. Reassure children that life will return to normal. Reassure them that they are safe and that the people in authority are working hard to keep them safe. The president, the school principal and parents are all working to keep children safe.
6. Tell children what you know calmly and simply. Place it in context (where the events occurred, the fact that these things do not happen everyday, etc.).
7. Limit television watching for at-risk and young children. If you allow your child to watch television, sit with your child and discuss what you are seeing.

8. Children can handle bad news when it is not immediate, when it is not visual and when parents are supporting them.

9. Listen to what children are saying. Listen to their stress.

10 Always tell children the truth. If you minimize the danger, the child will still worry and be frightened. Children tend to know when parents are upset. Children need coping strategies. Don't pretend that the event didn't happen, children are smart. They will imagine that things are even worse than they are, if parents do not tell them what is going on.

11. Adults need to model self control. They need to model strategies for remaining calm. If you feel highly emotional or extremely stressed, get help or calm yourself before dealing with your children.

12 Watch children for more serious indications that they are not coping very well.

13. Make sure that children get enough sleep and exercise. Avoid separations that are not necessary.

14. Use simple direct vocabulary when telling about events. For example, explain that people died, not that they 'went to sleep'.

15. Give children hope that their feelings will get easier to handle in the coming days.

16. Do not hesitate to consult with your school psychologist if you are concerned about your child.

Research Findings to Consider

1. When humans cause disasters, problems in reaction to the tragedy go on longer. More people react with more serious problems to human caused tragedy than to natural disasters.
2. Sudden violence has a more serious effect on children who are at-risk or who already have emotional problems.
3. A disaster can trigger feelings of responsibility or exacerbate general distrust and fear.
4. Debriefing is thought to prevent or reduce the risk of developing stress reactions that may prove chronic. The goals of debriefing include sharing how others are reacting and expressing emotion. Social support comes from hearing others experience and feelings. Talking with friends in small groups led by adults, and discovering that others are also frightened or sad is thought to help students and adults recover. During debriefing, the leader/listener must be nonjudgmental. This is particularly important.
5. After a disaster, research suggests that it is very important to repeat information simply and correctly.
6. Even secondhand exposure to violence can result in post-traumatic stress.

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Recommendations for Helping Children in School and at Home

1. Begin by asking questions. It is important to find out what your child understands. If you ask questions, you can figure out how stressed your child may be or what is bothering your child most. Ask questions such as "What is bothering you most?" and "What is hard to share?" or "What haven't you told me about?"
2. Remind your child that everyone feels stressed and it is important to share what is bothering him or her. Children need to be told that they shouldn't worry all by themselves.
3. Young children are most concerned about their own safety. They need to know how far away the events are from their own daily life. They need to know that their own immediate family is safe and their closest relatives are safe. They need to know that the school has staff people who are taking care of their safety, just as their parents are protecting them.
4. Talking with children as soon as possible after the event can reduce some stress symptoms from developing or intensifying.
5. Young children, sensitive children, vulnerable children, children who are depressed or anxious, and other at-risk children should have their television seriously limited. Television can cause further trauma as the event is replayed over and over. Watching television violence can affect aggressive children by desensitizing them to violence. If parents decide to allow children to watch television, parents should sit beside their children and talk with them about what is being viewed. Answer children's questions while watching television with them, simply and clearly. If the child does not want to watch, your child should never be forced to do so.
6. Never force children to talk if they are not ready to do so. Forcing children to talk about the event can re-traumatize children. Use more indirect techniques, use reassurance or books to help children begin to deal with their feelings.
7. Assure children that it is normal to feel upset. Do not criticize children who may behave as if they were much younger or who are sad or who cry.
8. Give children decisions to make to start to rebuild a sense of competence. Give them jobs to do to help around the house. Give them a task that may help victims or praise rescue workers if they are old enough or want to help.
9. Tell children the truth. Gently agree that some kinds of violence could affect us but most people in this country have not been exposed to disasters or terrorism, and your child is safe right now.

Activities for the Classroom:

1. If children do not want to engage in discussions about the events of the day, do not force them to participate and give them a graceful way to exit the classroom. Be sensitive to cultural differences about expressing negative emotions.
2. Brainstorm a list of words that are associated with violence. Prompt students to include verbal violence such as calling others names, swearing or yelling. Word that hurt should be included such as 'dummy', 'jerk', 'retard', 'stupid'. Ask them to define violence.
3. Ask students to write or draw a picture (about a time they were frightened, or about a time they were angry) and describe the feelings associated with

4. Ask children to brainstorm sentences beginning with the word 'sometimes'. For example: 'Sometimes people are so angry that they don't care who gets hurt...!'
5. Ask if make-believe violence can be a problem?
6. Ask children to draw pictures of where they feel most safe. Ask them to make a list of adults with whom they feel safe.
7. Involve children in coping strategies. This gives children a sense of control. Students can plan strategies for dealing with situations or plan how they can help victims or honor rescuers. Children can write letters, notes of sympathy, letters to the editor, or write letters of appreciation to rescuers or to their own parents and teachers. Children can hold fund raisers or make ribbons.
8. Hold circle discussions in which you ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to children's responses and opinions. Teachers might ask questions such as:
 - a. What did you hear first?
 - b. What was your first thought?
 - c. What were your worries then?
 - d. What are your worries now?
 - e. What would make you feel safe right now?
 - f. When you had have had to deal with tragedy before, what helped you cope with it?
 - g. What are we doing to prevent this from happening in our own school?
 - h. What would we do to keep people safe if something tragic happened here?
 - i. What can we do to express our sympathy?
 - j. Is there too much violence in our world today?
 - k. What do we know about people who have different beliefs than we do?
 - l. What do you do when you feel frightened? How do you calm yourself?
 - m. How do people cope when something 'bad' happens? What works best?

In a circle discussion, the teacher is the facilitator rather than the expert. The teacher only briefly reviews the facts and lets students ask and answer questions, expressing their own opinions. Each student should have the chance to share his or her views. If you are asked a question for which you do not have an answer, say that you don't have an answer. Set firm limits on contributions to the discussion that includes hate statements, threats, or gory details. Do not prolong the discussion beyond a reasonable time. Watch to see that none of the students are reacting too strongly. Ask students to let you know if they uncomfortable with the discussion.

9. Include lessons on tolerance to make sure that children do not blame a group or harbor negative feelings toward innocent people. Separate reactions to the people who caused the terrorism from whole classes of people. Discuss what the media chooses to show to the world about people's reactions to the events. Ask if the portrayal is fair, real or harmful. At the same time if student expresses anger, assure them that anger is a healthy response as long as it is realistic and fair. Gently lead students to a realistic understanding of the event.

10. Consider a brief history lesson so children have some idea about why terrorists might be angry with our country.

11. Let parents know that you will be discussing the events in class so they in turn can let you know if their child will have difficulty with the discussion and will need your support.