

## **Talking to Children About Terrorism and War**

In today's world, parents are faced with the challenge of explaining violence, terrorism and war to children. Although difficult, these conversations are extremely important. They give parents an opportunity to help their children feel more secure and understand the world in which they live. The following information can be helpful to parents when discussing these issues:

### **Listen to Children:**

- Create a time and place for children to ask their questions. Don't force children to talk about things until they're ready.
- Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in a city or state associated with incidents or events.
- Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems directly or indirectly related to current events.

### **Answer Children's Questions:**

- Use words and concepts your child can understand. Make your explanation appropriate to your child's age and level of understanding. Don't overload a child with too much information.
- Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know if you're not being honest.
- Be prepared to repeat explanations or have several conversations. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may be your child's way of asking for reassurance.
- Acknowledge and support your child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let your child know that you think their questions and concerns are important.
- Be consistent and reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises.
- Avoid stereotyping groups of people by race, nationality, or religion. Use the opportunity to teach tolerance and explain prejudice.
- Remember that children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They are very interested in how you respond to events. They learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
- Let children know how you are feeling. It's OK for them to know if you are anxious or worried about events. However, don't burden them with your concerns.
- Don't confront your child's way of handling events. If a child feels reassured by saying that things are happening very far away, it's usually best not to disagree. The child may need to think about events this way to feel safe.

**Provide Support:**

- Don't let children watch lots of violent or upsetting images on TV. Repetitive frightening images or scenes can be very disturbing, especially to young children.
- Help children establish a predictable routine and schedule. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays, and group activities take on added importance during stressful times.
- Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about activities and discussions at school. Teachers should know about the child's specific fears or concerns.
- Children who have experienced trauma or losses may show more intense reactions to tragedies or news of war or terrorist incidents. These children may need extra support and attention.
- Watch for physical symptoms related to stress. Many children show anxiety and stress through complaints of physical aches and pains.
- Watch for possible preoccupation with violent movies or war theme video/computer games.
- Children who seem preoccupied or very stressed about war, fighting, or terrorism should be evaluated by a qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need professional help include: on-going trouble sleeping, persistent upsetting thoughts, fearful images, intense fears about death, and trouble leaving their parents or going to school. The child's physician can assist with appropriate referrals.
- Help children communicate with others and express themselves at home. Some children may want to write letters to the President, Governor, local newspaper, or to grieving families.
- Let children be children. They may not want to think or talk a lot about these events. It is OK if they'd rather play ball, climb trees, or ride their bike, etc.

War and terrorism are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel confused, upset, and anxious. Parents, teachers, and caring adults can help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent, and supportive manner. Most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they can and do get through difficult times and go on with their lives. By creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, parents can help them cope and reduce the possibility of emotional difficulties.

## Talking to Teenagers About Terrorism and War

Terrorism is a violent act committed by people who want to get attention for their cause. When a terrorist strikes, it seems like the entire world is upside down and confusing. It's hard to believe what's happened or that someone would do something like that.

Acts of terrorism have been a reality in many places for years. In the United States, the worst attacks happened on September 11, 2001. In the years that followed, other attacks also happened in Spain, London, and elsewhere.

Terrorism scares everyone because no one knows when or where it will take place. So how do you cope with it all? Here are some things you can do:

- Give yourself a fear reality check. It's normal to be worried about your safety and your family's safety. Even though your chances of being in an attack are very, very small, the images you see on TV or online make terrorist attacks seem close by.
- Share your feelings. Anger, sadness, fear, and numbness are some of the reactions you might have. Don't be embarrassed or afraid to express how you feel. Just talking and sharing your feelings with your parents, friends, teachers, and others can help them and help you.
- Take care of yourself. Losing sleep, not eating, and worrying too much can make you sick. As much as possible, try to get enough sleep, eat right, exercise, and keep a normal routine. It may be hard to do, but it can keep you healthy and better able to handle a tough time.
- Limit the time you spend watching the news. It's good to be informed about what's happening, but spending hours watching the news reports can make you feel more anxious and sad.
- Be respectful of others. You may have heard certain countries, religions, or political causes blamed for terrorism. But very few people believe in killing and hurting innocent people to make their point. Don't give into prejudice by blaming a whole group, or disliking people just because of the country where they were born, the faith they practice, the way they dress, or the colour of their skin.
- Join with others. Participating in candlelight vigils, religious ceremonies, memorial services, or other events can be helpful. It's a way to show you care and that the community is sticking together during a sad time.
- Get additional support. A traumatic event can cause strong reactions, but if your feelings make it impossible for you to function and do normal stuff, like go to school, it's time to seek additional help. Turn to a parent, teacher, religious leader, or guidance counsellor, so you can get the help you need.