

How to Talk to Children About a National Disaster

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All of us have reason to be concerned with the recent national disaster. We may, however, be able to prevent undue and unnecessary strain on our lives. Children may be particularly vulnerable and concerned, because:

- they have no experience with this sort of disaster(s);
- they sense the concern and fear of adults;
- they have limited skills for understanding the situation and separating what's happening to others from what's happening to them; and
- If the child is already under stress, it can be an additional issue to tip the scale.

Some Signs of Increased Stress

If you observe some of the following signs of stress in a young person, you might consider the possibility that they are related to the disaster and make an effort to ease the stressful feelings.

- Extreme vigilance; always looking for danger
- Depression, lethargy, disinterest in normal activities
- High anxiety states; fearful even in relatively safe situations
- Behavior or discipline problems

Things Parents Can Do to Help Their Children Cope

Give your children real information about what is happening, including:

- how the medical and rescue teams are helping victims and their families;
- when the disaster happened, and
- where this happened – look at a map of the state.

It is very important to avoid exposing your child to too much detail about the disaster. You can do this by:

- limiting the amount of time he or she may watch disaster coverage on television;
- limiting the amount of time the family discusses the disaster; and
- not permitting family members daily routines to be interrupted (for example, bedtime, going to school time etc., should stay on schedule).

Be a Model of How to Cope

- Admit your own fear, sadness, and concern.
- Go on with your life – don't let fear immobilize you.
- Continue to give your child love and discipline.

Listen to Your Child Express His or Her Concerns and Worries

- Acknowledge the child's concerns and support his problem-solving attempts.
- Acknowledge and let your child have her feelings.
- Tell the child what is safe and that he is likely to be safe.
- Allow the child to problem-solve with things she can do to help herself feel better, such as sleeping with a night light or a stuffed animal, etc.
- Avoid prejudice as news reports are aired/printed. There is a danger that we will make certain groups of people – nationalities, religions, etc. –the "bad guys"...the cause of all wrong. We want to avoid dehumanizing anyone or teaching children to do so. Hatred spreads like a disease, and is not helpful. We need to support, not hate each other.

Emphasize the things we can continue to control, such as the normal activities of our daily lives: going to school, having supper together, writing notes to friends, helping with collections and supplies for victims and their families.

Acknowledge the issues that we do not know about: how long we will be talking about the disaster, who did it and why, how many people are hurt, and what will happen next. Avoid speculation.

For children who know people involved, emphasize what they can do:

- Write, if possible, to share their concern.
- Consider a support group if the person is a close family member.

- Practice some sort of family ritual to recognize that these people are in our thoughts. For example, if the family is religious, say a prayer together. Or, write a letter together.

Summary

There are no easy ways to deal with facing the fact that our country is vulnerable to attack from terrorists, but it doesn't help our children, or ourselves, to either deny that it can happen; or to be consumed with it. Helping children cope with this level of unexpected violence means we need to cope with it ourselves. As leaders of our families, we must find ways to support our children.

Other Resources

Other resources and information may be obtained by visiting:

<http://www.okpsych.org/disasterlinks.htm>

Materials for Parents, Teachers and Children

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<http://www.ChildTrauma.org>

Dear Friends,

The tragic and horrifying events of September 11th have touched us all.

Our deepest sympathy goes out to the victims and their families whose lives have been shattered by these terrorist acts. There are no words that can ever take away such profound pain. Our hope is that we can help those most devastated cope with these terrible experiences.

In this regard, we have worked with hundreds of children and their families shattered by traumatic experiences over the last 15 years. They have taught us a great deal about resilience, courage and the tremendous challenges of maintaining and restoring normal life following catastrophic personal trauma.

As many of you know, this work has led us to write a series of articles to help caregivers, teachers and parents better understand some of the effects of exposure to trauma on children. These are not comprehensive materials; they complement many other excellent resources available online and through various organizations.

We know that "expert advice" will not take this pain away. But it is our hope that this information will make it easier to help those closest to this trauma carry its inevitable burdens; and for the rest of us that this can minimize the confusion, helplessness and distress that we will feel.

We have created a set of new materials for children, parents and teachers and will revise some of our original materials to better help the victims of these attacks. You will find these new materials at the bottom of our home page at <http://www.ChildTrauma.org>.

We are very thankful to our partners in these efforts: Digital Consulting and Software Services, Scholastic, Inc., the Alberta Mental Health Board and Powered, Inc. All of these organizations have contributed expertise and resources to help us provide the most rapid, efficient and effective response that we can.

We encourage you to use these resources; and let colleagues, friends and family know about these materials. Feel free to download, copy and distribute them in any manner you think will help.

As we continue to create and modify materials to help, we will post them in various forms on three sites: www.ChildTrauma.org; www.Scholastic.com; and www.amhb.ab.ca.

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