

Helping Your Child Deal With the Terrorist Tragedy

By Neil Izenberg, MD & Catherine Ginther

The tragedies that occurred at New York's World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, are impossible to describe. The loss of life from these terrorist attacks is devastating and frightening for us all.

How can you, as a parent, deal with the fear and anxiety that can affect your child in the wake of these horrible events? There is no single or easy answer. In part, how you respond will depend on whether members of your family have been personally involved, what your child has heard or seen on the news, and the age of your child.

What Should You Say to Your Child?

Of course, you need to talk to your child about this tragedy, but how you do it and what you say will depend on your child's ability to understand. Here are some thoughts to help you get started, no matter how old your child is:

- A toddler is unlikely to be able to comprehend what he or she sees on the news. Instead, a child of this age will be reacting to the emotions swirling all around. You won't likely be talking to your toddler about this disaster, but the grim news is everywhere: on TV, in conversations, in the expressions on people's faces. Your toddler may pick up these clues. Limit your conversations when your child is nearby. You should provide reassurance that you love your child and will be there to protect him or her, but you probably won't need to go into details about what happened.
- A preschooler may ask questions about what he or she has heard or seen, and if your child has questions, you should answer them to the best of your ability and only provide as much detail as your child needs. If your child is unaware of what's going on, don't bring it up.
- If your child is school age, he or she will probably be aware of the terrorist attacks through talking with other children, hearing about it in school, or seeing it on the news. Before you start offering explanations, find out what your child knows and what questions he or she has. That way, you can have a discussion about what your child is focused on.
- Let your feelings show. The mixed feelings you may be experiencing - anger, sorrow, mourning - are likely being felt by your child, too. It's OK for your child to see you expressing what you both are feeling. But if your feelings are out of control, you'll want to limit how you express them around your child.
- Maintain your balance. With the overwhelming dimension of this tragedy, it may seem that everything is out of control. There's bound to be a lot of fear and anxiety around. Anxiety is "contagious" - particularly for young children. It will be helpful for your child to see that your world, and theirs, is not in

chaos. To the extent that it's possible, try to maintain your daily family routines.

- Talk about it. An event like this and its impact on you should not be minimized - not talking about it won't mean that it will go away, nor will avoiding the subject protect your child from any concerns he or she may have. Help your child understand feelings by naming them, such as "I'm so upset about what happened in New York..." And let your child know that these feelings are normal and to be expected at a time like this.
- Listen to your child. TV news will be covering these tragedies heavily in the weeks to come, and it will be the topic of everyone's conversations. Encourage your child to tell you what he or she has heard. Some of it may not be accurate, and some details may be exaggerated. Ask your child how he or she feels, what seems scary, and what worries him or her the most. And then, where possible, reassure your child about your family's safety.
- Limit and monitor TV time. Stories about the terrorist attacks and our country's response to them will be on TV at all hours - not just during regular news broadcasts. If your child is the first one up in the morning and always heads to the living room to watch cartoons, consider that regular programming might be pre-empted. Repeated exposure to such graphic scenes can be traumatizing for a child. Find other activities to entertain your child - reading, watching videos, and playing outdoors, for example. And if your child does see footage of the attacks while you're watching the news, be sure to discuss what was shown and help your child understand what's going on.
- Express your love for your child. Your child needs to feel safe and protected by you. Despite the widespread violence we have just witnessed, reassure your child that the danger to your family is minimal and that you are there to protect your child.
- Spend some time with your child. Your presence alone will be comforting and provide an opportunity to talk about what happened. Some families find worshipping together, meditating, or otherwise spending time together to be particularly comforting at a time like this.

When to Seek Professional Help

Different children will react differently. The immense scale of what has happened may reverberate in your child's life for many months to come.

You should look for signs that your child may need extra help to get through this ordeal. Although it's normal to be troubled by these tragedies, your child may need professional help if his or her fears, anxieties, or changes in behaviors do not go away after a few days or persist beyond what you had anticipated.

Children who have experienced other losses or trauma in their lives, such as the death of a close relative, physical abuse, or bullying, may have a stronger reaction to seeing and hearing about the terrorist attacks.

Younger children may show signs of stress by clinging to you, withdrawing, complaining of feeling ill, or showing signs of aggression. Sleeping and eating habits may change as well.

Adolescents and teens may also experience changes in their eating and sleeping habits, and they may not want to go to school. They may not enjoy activities that they previously participated in, and they may become involved in verbal or physical fights or display aggressive behaviors.

If you think your child is having difficulty coping with these events, consult your child's doctor or a mental health professional.

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