

Responding to Children's Questions and Concerns About Anthrax

Many parents and adults are concerned about the recent threats of bio-terrorism by the spread of Anthrax through the mail system. It is important to first understand some of the basic facts about the Anthrax threat. Then it is essential that before we talk with our children, we are aware of our own fears about the threat. Children take their cues from their parents and important adults on how to respond to anxiety provoking situations. We must remember that, as adults, it is not only our job to protect our children, but also to help them feel safe and secure in a sometimes-threatening world.

What is known about the current Anthrax situation?

As of November 1st, there are fewer than 20 total cases of Anthrax and most of them have been non-fatal. Only one child has been diagnosed with Anthrax. While the idea of the fact that someone is trying to harm us by causing a fatal infection is unfathomable, the threat of Anthrax to the average citizen continues to be infinitesimally small, especially when compared to the rates of automobile fatalities, accidental injuries in the home, etc.

Anthrax infections have been limited to New York City, Northern New Jersey, Boca Raton, Florida and the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. All contaminated letters have been mailed to media personnel or political leaders.

The vast majority of infections have occurred in people who are known to have direct contact with mail in which Anthrax spores were concealed.

Even the most dangerous form of Anthrax infection (inhaled form) is treatable when caught early on and new early and rapid detection methods have recently been developed.

The threat from Anthrax infection has greatly diminished and the efforts towards insuring our security seem to have been effective.

My children aren't talking about Anthrax, how do I introduce the subject?

It is important to remember that children differ greatly depending on their age and developmental level. Some children may be hearing about Anthrax on the news or at school, while other children may not be aware of the threat at all. If your children haven't mentioned that they are concerned about the Anthrax scares, then perhaps they are not.

Younger children, especially, may not be aware of the Anthrax threat. It is more likely that younger children will respond to their parent's and other adults' worries than they are to the news. You may ask older children (approximately 4th grade and up) about their thoughts about the news. It is often easier for children to

discuss their ideas and feelings when they are asked about their classmates and friends (e.g. what are the kids at school saying about...?). If they don't raise concerns about Anthrax and are not demonstrating behavioral changes (See: In the Aftermath of Terrorism: A Summary) then there is no reason for you to introduce the subject. Remember the goal of the Anthrax mail is to induce fear, not to infect people. Fear often overwhelms reason, but try to think rationally when dealing with your children. It is essential to recognize and then separate fear from the facts in ourselves and in others.

Try to take your cues from your child about what is worrying them. Don't assume that you know what your child's fears and concerns are without first talking to them. If your child is worried about Anthrax, ask them what they know about it and then tell them the facts. It is important to reassure children that they probably are very safe from the threat of Anthrax. Instilling unnecessary fear and anxiety in your children is not helpful and will not help to protect them from any potential threat.

Telling your children the facts about Anthrax in an age appropriate manner and letting them know that there is little to worry about should help relieve their anxiety and fear. However, if you are fearful and anxious, regardless of what you say, your children will be more affected by your mood than by your words. If you are feeling anxious then try to have someone else talk with your children.

And finally, be thoughtful about where your children are getting their information. If children are watching the news or reading about terrorism scares in the media, parents should guide them in this process. One may even consider turning off the news if the need to watch seems to be a manifestation of the worry. If your children are going to watch the news, watch it with them and use it as an opportunity to engage in some family discussion.

We live in one of the areas mentioned and my kids are talking about it all the time usually by joking, what do I tell them?

Again, the risks of many dangerous things are much greater than Anthrax, for instance, getting hit by a car or being in a car accident. There are things that one does to be safe that minimizes the risk such as looking both ways when crossing the street and using cross walks. Although unnecessary, if you are worried about Anthrax through the mail, you may want to take some precautions such as asking your children to let you go through the mail first. Do not open any suspicious looking letters and report any highly unusual mail to your post office or local law enforcement personnel. Although this level of concern is not warranted, if you want to minimize your and your family's risk you can wear latex gloves when handling the mail and wipe envelopes lightly with a bleach solution. This will kill any Anthrax that has contaminated the external surface of any mail. But remember, the risk of Anthrax to you and your family is incredibly small.

My child is acting more worried and irritable, but is not saying anything about Anthrax, what should I do?

It is hard to know if children who are responding in this way are reacting specifically to Anthrax fears or to the general anxiety in the adults and peers around them. If you notice some concerning or unusual behaviors in your children, you can point out these behaviors and ask them if they have any ideas about what they are about. If they are unable to answer the question, you may ask them if they have been listening to the news or if they have been worried about anything that is going on in the world. If they respond with a yes, then starting a conversation about what their fears and concerns are would be a good place to start. If they have specific concerns about the threats of Anthrax or other forms of terrorism, then find out what their understanding of these issues is, and then correct any erroneous assumptions or ideas they may have. If your children indicate that they have concerns and fears, you can provide them with some basic information and do your best to reassure them. However, do not overwhelm your children with more information or too many details beyond what they are asking. Consider who your child is-- you know him or her better than anyone else. Think about what your child can handle and what level of information would be most appropriate.

Remember that the Anthrax scare may be a way of talking about other worries that your child is either unaware of or unable to talk about. Be careful to allow for other issues to come up that might not be related to Anthrax. Creating an open, trusting atmosphere where your child can come to you and talk about their fears and concerns is the goal. As a parent or significant adult, children will look to you for guidance and cues on how to respond to potentially scary things in the world around them. Show your children, by your example, how to be appropriately concerned, but not to let fear and unnecessary anxiety overwhelm you. And finally, remember that if you are having a hard time, you should seek out assistance and support for yourself. If we give into the terror, then we will not be able to help our children.

What if I've tried all these things, but I still have serious worries and concerns about how my child is coping?

If you have serious concerns about your child's behavior and do not feel able to help, do not worry alone. Contact your pediatrician or qualified child mental health care provider.