

Parents' Guide for Talking to their Children

Updated September 26, 2001

Why should I talk about this with my children?

In the wake of our national tragedy, we join you in your concerns about how best to address the needs of our children. The frightening or distressing events we have recently experienced and the ongoing threat of war can take away a child's basic sense of safety and security, just as it does for adults. We all share in the terrible sense of loss and ongoing worries about safety for ourselves and those we care about. As adults, though, it is our job to try our best to support each other and our children and come together as individuals, families, communities and a nation to cope with these events. Parents are the central sources of safety and security for their children. Children of different ages see what happens, understand it and react to it differently. As adults we must remember that we cannot assume that our children's worries are the same as our own. If you feel too anxious or overwhelmed, ask a relative or a friend to talk to your children and find someone you can talk to as well. When we as parents are able to listen to our children to understand their feelings and worries, we can help them make sense of them.

What questions are children likely to have?

What happened?

Like adults, children are better able to deal with a situation if they feel they understand it. They want -- and need -- information just like adults. Begin by asking your children what they already understand about the situation. They have likely heard about it on TV, at school, or from their friends. Much of their information, though, may not be accurate. As they explain what they know about the situation, you can figure out what it is they don't already know or understand. Look for misunderstandings or frightening rumors. Tell the truth; do not mislead them.

The amount of details that children will find useful will depend on their age. The older the child is, the more details will likely be discussed. Provide the basic information in simple and direct terms and then ask for questions. Take your cues from your child in determining how much information to provide. Provide reassurance whenever possible and remind them that they are not at great risk of danger.

How could something like this happen?

Our government is working to figure out how to prevent something like this from happening again and to help the world become safer and more peaceful as soon as possible. But when children ask this question after a crisis, often they are really looking for reassurance that they are now safe. Take this question as an

opportunity to reassure children of the steps we are all taking now to keep them safe. Terrorist acts such as this and ongoing concerns about the need for armed combat remind us all that we are never completely safe — but now is the time to reassure children that, in reality, they should feel safe in school, in their home, and in their community.

What could I (or someone else) have done to prevent this?

After a tragic event, we all wonder what we and others could have done to prevent this from happening. Even when it is obvious that there is nothing your children could have done to prevent or minimize the crisis, they may still feel helpless and wish they could change what happened, especially if they know someone who was injured or killed. Many more people are wondering who else might be at fault — they may be angry with the government, at adults they trust to protect them (including their parents), and others for failing to prevent this crisis. Let children know that this is a normal reaction; we all wish that there is something we could have done to prevent this tragedy. Perhaps the most important thing is to concentrate on what can be done now to help those most directly affected and to ensure safety in our communities.

Whose fault is it?

It is understandable that people would be angry at the individuals who commit acts of terrorism. But sometimes people are also angry at those people that are easier to find and blame — such as people who look like they might belong to the group that might have been responsible. Children should be told that although it is normal to feel angry, at this time it is important to remember that these acts of terrorism were committed by a small number of people who do not represent a particular race or ethnic group. The United States is a country that prides itself in having members of many different races and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together as a country, not to search to blame members of our country. It is important to let children know that our government is taking action to defend our country against those who threaten us.

What does this mean to me? How is this going to change my life?

This is a question that we all struggle to answer not only for our children but also for ourselves. Especially in difficult times, children may act immaturely. Children are often very concerned about themselves. When there is a tragic event, they may become even more concerned about what affects them personally. Adults who do not understand this may see this as being selfish or uncaring. It is important to make your children feel comfortable in asking questions and expressing their feelings. You are starting a conversation that you hope will continue for weeks and months as they begin to better understand and cope with the recent events. Expect your children to think more about themselves, at least at first. Once they feel that their needs are being met, they are more likely to think about helping others.

What can I do to help?

Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to try to help. While there may be little that they can do now to help the immediate victims of this crisis, there is a lot they can do to help. They can start by taking care of themselves — telling you when they are upset or worried, being honest and open. They can also offer help to other members of their community — their friends and classmates, their teacher, and other adults. Over time, they can think about how they, along with other members of their community, might be able to do something helpful for the victims and survivors.

How do I answer these questions? I don't want to make things worse, so should I say nothing instead?

Often what children need most is someone who they trust who will listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say — there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns and thoughts, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep our children from ever having to hear about something like this, reality does not allow this. Silence won't protect them from what happened, only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that listening, answering, and reassuring should be at the level of the child's understanding.

What if this discussion upsets them?

During these discussions, children may show that they are upset — they may cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are upset. Remember, it is really the events that are upsetting them, not the discussion. Talking about the events gives them a chance to show you how upset they really are. This is the first step to starting to cope and adjust. Feel free to pause the conversation to provide support and comfort to your children and ask if they wish to continue the discussion at another time. But make sure that they realize it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

What if they don't ask any questions — should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?

When a major crisis of this nature occurs, it is a good idea to be ready to talk with your children. At first, older children may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. In most cases it is not a good idea to force them to talk with you, but instead keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Keep an invitation open, but wait until they accept. Often children find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling instead of talking about themselves. Think about how your children dealt with prior crises in the past and consider trying now what helped them when they were upset or worried before.

What if my child doesn't seem upset by the recent events?

Many children may appear disinterested in the recent crisis and even irritated by the continued attention focused on these events. The size and scope of a child's world is smaller than that of an adult -- the crisis may simply not have affected them directly; they may be far more concerned about what affects their own life. Especially for young children, they may not yet understand, or even know, much of what has occurred or what it represents. They may be concerned, but afraid to ask questions or to share their feelings. Children find it difficult to hold strong emotions continually for a long period of time. They may visit their concerns briefly, but then turn to play or involve themselves in schoolwork before they allow themselves to feel overwhelmed. They may express their feelings indirectly through play or through changes in their behavior. For all of these reasons, it is easy for adults to underestimate children's reactions.

How do I know if my child needs more help than I can provide? Where would I go for such help?

When there is a tragedy of this size, it is important to remember that most children (and adults) are having "normal" reactions to a very abnormal situation — even if they seem very upset. But if your children continue to seem very upset for several days — especially if they are upset or worried about many things, or they are having (more) trouble in school, home or with their friends, then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. You may wish to speak with your children's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they NEED counseling — you should take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

What if I have more questions? Where can I turn for answers?

You may have many more questions or concerns. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence (www.ncccev.org) at 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238)

GUIDELINES

What worries us as adults is probably very different from what worries our children.

What children worry about will vary depending on their age.

If you listen to your children's questions and observe their behavior you will have a better idea of what they are concerned about.

Because children depend on the adults around them for safety and security, it is important for the adults to take care of themselves in order to take care of the children.

INFANTS

Infants depend totally on the adults who look after them. They sense the emotions of their caregivers and react accordingly. If the adult is calm and confident the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the infant will feel unprotected.

When adults are overtly anxious and distressed, infants may react. Infants may respond with fretful fussing, difficulty to be soothed, sleep and eating disturbances or may withdraw and seem lethargic and unresponsive.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life.

TODDLERS

At this age children have begun to interact with a broader physical and social environment. They still depend on the adults that look after them and therefore will respond to the situation depending on how adults react. As with infants, if the adult is calm and confident the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the toddler will feel unprotected.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating, sleeping and toileting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. They may also become more passive and withdrawn. It is also very common for children to become more clingy.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life. At this age, children have access to television. Television can generate anxiety because of the repetitive and graphic images it projects. Exposure should be limited as much as possible.

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

At this age children usually have become part of a social group beyond their family. Their language, play, social, and physical skills are more advanced. Through their play, talk and behavior, they show their ideas of good and bad, their pride in all the things they can do with their bodies and their fears about possible injury.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating and sleeping, bed-wetting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. Changes in play may include more aggressive pretend play, play that re-enacts the frightening events or inability to play. Children can have difficulties separating from parents or caregivers; they can also make a big fuss about small injuries. Preschoolers may be very preoccupied with questions related to who did it and what will happen to them.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining routines. Caregivers can become aware of the specific worries of each child by listening to their comments and questions and observing their play and other behavior. Once adults

understand the child's worries they can answer questions, correct misunderstandings and reassure the child. Exposure to television should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect the child from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

At this age children become more independent, they are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings, they play with their friends and participate in groups. Ideas of what is fair and just become important and they can cope with difficulties with better skills. School-age children are more involved in learning, sports and recreational activities.

Common reactions at this age include a need to stay close to parents and an inability to participate in ordinary activities. They can become too preoccupied with the events and ideas about revenge and punishment. School-age children can, like younger kids, experience nightmares, find it difficult to go to bed or wake up in the middle of the night. They may also change their eating habits. They can begin to have difficulties at school and can become anxious and aggressive.

Adults can become aware of the specific worries of individual children by listening to their comments and questions, observing changes in their play and other behaviors. Attention should be given to answer questions with accurate information and relate it to the child's worries. Friends' ideas should be discussed and misinformation corrected. As with younger children, exposure to television news should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect the child from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents can feel out of control due to the many changes that are happening in their bodies. They struggle to become independent of their families and to define themselves. The world of peers and teachers becomes central. It is common for adolescents to have conflicts with parents, teachers and other authority figures. There is a tendency to deny or exaggerate what happens around them and to feel that nothing can harm them.

Common reactions may include too much preoccupation with what is happening; they can feel frightened and out of control and can easily feel completely helpless or imagine themselves as unrealistically strong and powerful. Adolescents can also become even more judgmental and critical of the adults around them and those dealing with the crisis situation. They may also act in ways that can put themselves and others in danger. When faced with tragic events, their usual sense that nothing can harm them is lost, making them feel very unsafe.

Adults can help by using the adolescents' ability to think and talk to discuss their thoughts, feelings and worries. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable

talking in groups with their peers and or with teachers. Adults should be aware that drastic changes in adolescents' behaviors might indicate their distress. Forcing adolescents to talk about their feelings may cause more harm than good, and adults should make sure that adolescents have a variety of opportunities to talk to whom they want and when they are ready.

You may have many more questions or concerns. If you have concerns about your child contact your child' pediatrician, teacher or mental health professional. If you would like further information, please feel free to contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence (www.ncccev.org) at 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238) or (203) 785-7047.