

Talking to children about acts of terrorism or serious events: advice for parents and carers

Take time to listen and to talk

Take time to listen to what your child says and talk about what has happened. Children look to their parents and carers for guidance and reassurance. Even if your children are reluctant to talk about it at first, take the lead. What you say matters. Model that it is OK to talk about difficult things in an honest and open way.

Help your children express their feelings about the tragedy

Share your feelings with your children, it is OK for them to see you upset or worried, but set a good example by expressing your feelings in an appropriate manner. Extreme expressions of anger and grief may not be helpful to your child's sense of security and self-control.

Identify and acknowledge your children's fears

Children may have unrealistic fears that we do not anticipate. They might fear an attack on their home or loss of their parents or carers. Take time to find out what your children are thinking about and acknowledge that it is reasonable to be scared, horrified or anxious, or whatever it is they are feeling. Having acknowledged the feelings provide reassurance about their relative safety.

Review what they understand

As your children continue to deal with national or international events including terrorism, they may have misconceptions or misunderstandings about what took place, even if they have followed the news accounts. Talk about it in terms they can understand.

Think about what you want to say and how to explain

You may want to think about how you will talk with your children about what happened. It is generally better to talk about people who are evil and do violent and bad things, rather than evil people. Here is an example of how Libération, the French daily, explained the Paris attacks in November 2015.

There are violent people who are full of hate and want everyone to see the world the way they see it, and their weapon of choice is fear...Isis is a group of people like that. It says it's attacking France in retaliation for its part in bombing Isis strongholds in Iraq and Syria. Everyone's talking about it because that's what people do when they are shocked. It's natural. The French government wants to keep people safe, so for a few days, it wants to encourage people to stay at home and not go to school or the library. Some people will claim that all Muslims are bad but of course that is not true. Everyone wants to remember the people who died, hence the minute's silence, and perhaps to light a candle in their memory. But, attacks like this are very rare. The terrorists want to frighten people into changing the way we live and the best way to fight them is to behave normally.

Limit television exposure

Television news presents highly disturbing images and victim accounts that can be too frightening for most children, particularly those under the age of 12.

Express anger in an appropriate manner

It is understandable that children feel angry, but the target of that anger should be the terrorists or the people responsible. Discourage stereotypes and prejudice which grow so easily from hate and fear. Use the opportunity to teach respect, empathy and understanding and explain prejudice. If a British citizen commits an act of terrorism, it does not represent all British citizens or if a football supporter is violent towards a supporter of another team this does not mean all football supporters are violent.

Remember all children are different

Reactions will vary from child to child depending upon a variety of factors including their personality, age, developmental level and personal history. For example, children who have experienced trauma and loss, have family in the military or have longstanding emotional problems are most vulnerable during periods of new threats. 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: ongoing trouble sleeping, persistent upsetting thoughts, fearful images, intense fears about death, and trouble leaving their parents or going to school. However, not all children will appear to be affected by international events. Some 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.

You won't make it worse!

Often what children need most is someone whom 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. Silence won't protect them from what is happening, but silence will prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that listening, answering, and reassuring should be at the children's own level. While not always easy, talking is an important means of sharing your feelings and learning how to cope and adjust with loss. It is okay if your children get upset when talking about scary or disturbing things. As a parent or carer, you can then reassure them and help them to feel safe and secure. Make sure your children realise 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.

Find a positive

Sometimes in horrific events there are examples of people being brave or heroic. Share these or think with your child about things you could do to be positive like raising money for a charity. This opportunity can also be used to think about how we stand up for others, or what we can do to promote human rights and use legal ways to raise grievances.

Spend some family time in normal, reassuring activities.

Bake a cake. Go for a walk. Play a favourite game. Do something together as a family that helps your children feel comfortable and secure.

Get support for yourself

Speak to a friend, family member, community or faith leader or partner if you need support for yourself.

Adapted from: <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/projects/threat-assessment/talking-to-children-about-terrorism>

And: http://www.nyc.gov/html/mancb7/html/resources/emergency_parents.shtml

And: https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Children-About-Terrorism-And-War-087.aspx