

Talking to Children about Scary Events

Talking to children about traumatic events in the world can be difficult. As a parent, you want to protect your child from knowing about these bad events, yet children will come in contact with these topics through the media, families, their friends, and schools. You want to make the world a safe and predictable place, but sometimes, the best thing you can do is to be there for your children, answer as many of their questions as you can, and reassure them that you will keep them as safe as you possibly can. After terrifying and traumatic events, children are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- A family member will be injured or killed.
- They will be separated from their families.
- They will be left alone.

Here are some things you can do to help children cope during this event and afterwards:

- Limit your children's exposure to the media – TV, radio, newspapers, internet news.
- Do not expose your child to the event more than is necessary. Don't discuss it between adults in front of the children. However, if the children bring it up and have questions, listen to their concerns, and answer their questions honestly. You can acknowledge, within your religious and spiritual beliefs, that no one has all the answers as to why terrifying and traumatic events happen.
- Children want to feel that you are in control, and that they are safe. Try to respond to their concerns but try not to give too many details. Details make adults feel better, but too many details can fuel a child's imagination unnecessarily.
- Use age appropriate language and explanations. Children at different ages have very different concerns and fears. Try to ask your children what they think – what are their concerns, beliefs, and worries. Ask them about what they've heard at school. Sometimes children can explain themselves better through drawings or play rather than words. Knowing what they fear can help you provide the appropriate information and comfort.
- If you have children of different ages, it's best to speak with them individually, because they will have different questions based on their levels of understanding. Let their questions guide the depth of your discussion.
- The child's age affects how the child will respond to the current uncertainty. For example, six-year-olds may show their fear by refusing to go to school or to do things on their own. Adolescents may minimize their concerns but argue more with parents and show a decline in school performance. In young children, distressing dreams of the violent or traumatic event may change into nightmares of monsters or of threats to others.

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- Find out from the school what they are telling the children. Talk these facts and rumors through with the children.
- The way children see and understand their parent's response is very important. If your children are aware that you are upset, admit your concerns but stress your ability to cope.
- You don't need to know all the answers. You don't need to pretend that you know all the answers.
- Be available, nurturing, reassuring, and predictable. How you react to a traumatic event gives them clues on how to react.
- Comfort can come from that which is stable. Maintaining predictable routines will offer comfort during times of unpredictability. Do not be overly surprised if children regress to previous behaviors or routines.

Be alert to these changes:

- Refusal to do things on their own and clinging behaviors.
- Persistent expression of fears relating to the incident.
- Sleep disturbance such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, and bedwetting (which persists more than several days after the event.)
- Loss of concentration and irritability.
- Behavior problems.
- Physical complaints when a physical cause cannot be found.
- Withdrawal from family and friends, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with the violent event.

What next?

Over time, most people are able to effectively cope with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a series of scary events or other traumatic experience. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems can persist and can interfere with daily life. For example, some people may feel overwhelming nervousness, anxiety or stress that can adversely affect job or school performance and relationships with friends, family and co-workers. Consider contacting your EAP where licensed professionals are available 24/7 to provide support, resources, or counseling for you and/or your family members.

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