

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 87

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TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TERRORISM AND WAR

In today's world, parents are faced with the challenge of explaining violence, terrorism and war to children. Although difficult, these conversations are extremely important. They give parents an opportunity to help their children feel more secure and understand the world in which they live. The following information can be helpful to parents when discussing these issues:

Listen to Children:

1. Create a time and place for children to ask their questions. Don't force children to talk about things until they're ready.
2. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about friends or relatives who live in a city or state associated with incidents or events.
3. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems directly or indirectly related to current events.

Answer Children's Questions:

1. Use words and concepts your child can understand. Make your explanation appropriate to your child's age and level of understanding. Don't overload a child with too much information.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know if you're not being honest.
3. Be prepared to repeat explanations or have several conversations. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may be your child's way of asking for reassurance.
4. Acknowledge and support your child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let your child know that you think their questions and concerns are important.
5. Be consistent and reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises.
6. Avoid stereotyping groups of people by race, nationality, or religion. Use the opportunity to teach tolerance and explain prejudice.
7. Remember that children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They are very interested in how you respond to events. They learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
8. Let children know how you are feeling. It's OK for them to know if you are anxious or worried about events. However, don't burden them with your concerns.
9. Don't confront your child's way of handling events. If a child feels reassured by saying that things are happening "very far away," it's usually best not to disagree. The child may need to think about events this way to feel safe.

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Provide Support:

1. Don't let children watch lots of violent or upsetting images on TV. Repetitive frightening images or scenes can be very disturbing, especially to young children.
2. Help children establish a predictable routine and schedule. Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays, and group activities take on added importance during stressful times.
3. Coordinate information between home and school. Parents should know about activities and discussions at school. Teachers should know about the child's specific fears or concerns.
4. Children who have experienced trauma or losses may show more intense reactions to tragedies or news of war or terrorist incidents. These children may need extra support and attention.
5. Watch for physical symptoms related to stress. Many children show anxiety and stress through complaints of physical aches and pains.
6. Watch for possible preoccupation with violent movies or war theme video/computer games.
7. 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. The child's physician can assist with appropriate referrals.
8. Help children communicate with others and express themselves at home. Some children may want to write letters to the President, governor, local newspaper, or to grieving families.
9. Let children be children. They 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.

War and terrorism are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, many young children feel confused, upset, and anxious. Parents, teachers, and caring adults can help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent, and supportive manner. Most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they can and do get through difficult times and go on with their lives. By creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, parents can help them cope and reduce the possibility of emotional difficulties.

For additional information see other *Facts for Families*: #36 Helping Children After a Disaster, #13 Children and TV Violence, #47 The Anxious Child, #54 Children and Watching TV, #67 Children and the News, #55 Understanding Violent Behavior in Children. See also: *Your Child* (1998 AACAP, Harper Collins) and *Your Adolescent* (1999 AACAP, Harper Collins).

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