

# A Guide for Parents:

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## Tips for Talking with Children About Terrorism

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*(Author's Note: This tip sheet was written immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and was circulated around the world. Ten Tips for Talking with Children About Terrorism was updated in 2006 after the 5th anniversary of 9/11.)*

As much as we try and protect our children from traumatic events, it is no exaggeration to say that almost every child in America was exposed to the horrible events of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Many adults struggled with their own reactions to these painful events, and it is very difficult to support our children emotionally while coping with our own strong emotions. Here are ten tips to keep in mind while you are talking to your child about any tragedy—terrorism or otherwise.

### **1. It's Not WHAT You Say, It's HOW You Say It.**

Take care to modulate your own emotional response around your children. If you are feeling intense emotions about Tuesday's tragedy, now may not be the best time to talk with your children. Talk about the tragedy with your child only after you feel more in control of your emotions. Take care of yourself first. Talk over your feelings with a spouse, friend or therapist. If you are overcome with emotion, your child will sense that and she will become more frightened. Once you are ready, remember that it is fine to share some of your feelings with your child. For example, you can let your child know that you feel sad for the children and families who have been hurt by the ter-

rorists' actions. When you do share your feelings with your child, it is important that you also share simple coping strategies with your child. Using the example above, you might say something to your child like: "When I feel sad like that, it helps me to think about how my family and friends are safe, and it's my job to help keep you safe."

### **2. Comfort, Comfort & Comfort**

Appropriate physical contact can be very soothing for a child who is feeling frightened or nervous. When you begin to talk to your child, bring him onto your lap and place your arms around him. Or sit next to him on the couch with your arm around him. Or have him stand in front of you while you are sitting and hold both of his hands in yours. Do whatever feels comfortable for both you and your child. If you talk about safety with your arms around your child, then he will not only have a verbal experience of safety, but he will also have a much deeper experience of physical safety. (Just remember: make physical contact with your child only after you have dealt with your own emotions (see Tip #1, above). Children are very sensitive and pick up a great deal about emotional states from physical contact. Touching a child when you are anxious will only serve to make the child more anxious.)

Verbal comforting is equally important. As parents, it is important to continually demonstrate to your child in word and deed that our main job is keeping them safe. Remind your child about the other adults around them who also share that job: teachers, doctors, police, etc. Reassure them that adults who love and care surround them. If your child asks you a question that you can't answer, be honest. And continue to reassure them that you will keep them safe.

**3. LISTEN to Your Child**

In the face of tragedy, a common mistake many parents make is to over-explain or use too many words. Don't lecture. Lecturing a child about a traumatic event is usually more about taking care of ourselves than about listening to the child. (If you find yourself lecturing and explaining too much to your child, go back and re-read Tip #1, above.) Listen. Give your child room to talk about his fears. Try using open-ended questions, such as, "How did you feel when your friends told you about the airplane crashing into the building?" Ask a question, and then truly listen to your child. You can show your child that you are attending to them by re-phrasing what you hear your child say, and then repeating it back to them. An example of this would be, "So it sounds to me like you felt pretty scared when you heard Jimmy tell you about the plane crash. Is that right?"

**4. Leave Room for Questions**

Children are curious by nature, so it is natural that your child might have many questions about a terrorist attack. Make sure you leave room for your child to be able to ask his own questions. As you are talking to your child, pause from time to time and ask, "Do you have any questions?" or "What do you think about what I just said?" Take time to truly listen to your child's questions (See Tip #3, above). Respond to your child at a level that is appropriate for your child's age and developmental level. Many times children cannot fully articulate a question that they have. In that case, it pays to take time to explore the fear or concern that your child has that lies behind the question. Common fears that children have when they are faced with trauma include: worrying that the bad event will happen again; worrying that someone they love will be hurt or killed; and worrying that they will be either left alone or somehow separated from the family. Again, careful listening pays off. After listening to your child, you might say something like, "It sounds like you are worried that mommy or I might get hurt by those bad men? Is that right?" And then provide comfort, comfort & more comfort!

It is also normal for a child not to ask many questions about a traumatic event or even to appear uninterested in the events. Every child, like every adult, is go-

ing to handle stressful situations in their own, slightly unique way. Honor your own child's way of coping.

**5. Keep it Simple**

Keep your response short and sweet. A common rule of thumb: the younger the child, the shorter the answer needs to be. When my three-and-a-half year old daughter asked me, "Why did those bad men hurt those people?" I responded with, "Those bad men made really bad choices to hurt those people." To which she replied, "They sure did."

**6. Limit the Media**

During a televised crisis, the intense, stern or often worried voice of the television commentator combined with the oft-repeated viewings of the tragedy is a certain recipe for anxiety and worry in your child. As much as you may want to hear about the tragedy, use discretion about watching the media in front of your children. If you do expose your children to the media, be prepared to take extra time to talk to and listen to them about what they see and hear.

**7. Value the Process**

Remember that supporting your child and helping her feel safe is an on-going process. Be sure to listen, reassure and comfort your child. Just like some adults, some children have questions or concerns about an event long after the event is over. Other children may talk about a subject once, and never bring it up again. There are many healthy ways that children can effectively deal with traumatic situations. Don't view talking with your child about any traumatic event (such as a terrorist attack) as a one-time event. It is far better to consider it an on-going discussion, and take the necessary cues from your child about what he needs.

**8. Stick to the Routine**

Children of all ages thrive on consistency. For your child's sake, it is important to return to your normal family routine as soon as possible after a tragedy. Children find significant comfort in the normal routine—family dinner hour; bedtime stories and the like.

If the terrorist event interrupts your child's schooling and your child is home from school for a day or more, then it is best to use your family's weekend schedule.

### 9. Accentuate the Positive!

One way people gain mastery over a tragedy is to do something positive, if even in a small way (like writing a tip sheet!). Consider donating time, money or other resources that can in some way help out the victims the terrorist action. Involve your child in the process. Perhaps your child can donate clothes or toys that she no longer is using. Even very small children can help prepare a box of toys to be sent to other children. Or, as a family, forego ice cream or some other treat, and send the money to an appropriate place to benefit the victims. Helping others can go a long way toward helping ourselves and our children deal with painful feelings.

### 10. Use Play and Humor

Many children may be unable to unwilling to talk about a traumatic event for a variety of reasons. Words are not the only way children can find resolution. Many children respond very well to play—puppets, painting or role playing—sprinkled with liberal amounts of humor. Other children may want to draw and/or color. Follow your child's lead. Don't be surprised if strong feelings such as anger or fear come out during the playtime. This can be a normal and healthy way for children to discharge their emotions. For example, once when my daughter was frightened by an event, she spent a good deal of time drawing pictures.... and then ripping them up! When done appropriately and in a safe manner, large-muscle activities like ripping and tearing can be a great way for children to manage fear and anxiety.

Using humor can be a natural, healthy way to manage strong feelings. Humor must be used appropriately, however. While laughing at a tragedy is never appropriate, light-hearted humor can be a very powerful against frightening events for children.

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### About the author

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