



CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY PROGRAMS

Helping Children and Their Families Cope with Disasters



Real Words to Help Children Cope with Tragedy

By Dawn Koger, Ph.D

What happened to our nation on September 11, 2001, is impossible to describe. Yet those of us who care for and about children are faced with the daunting task of describing and explaining death, destruction, war and terrorism to our young people. Though it is never easy to talk about difficult subjects and there are no perfect words, there are ways to help children understand and cope with disaster and trauma.

The following guidelines are categorized by age group and offer real words to try, but explanations need to be tailored to the developmental stage, personality and life experiences of individual children. As you look for words to use, keep in mind what a particular child is capable of understanding. Is the child's natural tendency to be anxious, fearful or worrisome or relaxed and calm? Consider the child's history of trauma and loss. All of these factors will impact how you can expect a particular child to understand and react to the information they see and hear.

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Preschoolers

Preschool-aged children, ages 2 to 5, are literal thinkers, unable to understand abstract concepts and language. Time, distance and location are confusing to children this age. Preschoolers will not realize that a single event is being rebroadcast time and time again - they will have a sense that the terror keeps happening. Preschool-aged children have active imaginations and have trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

As caregivers of preschoolers, our first and foremost responsibility is to protect them. If they have not seen or heard about what happened, there is no need to tell them. On the other hand, if preschoolers have been exposed to the events, our main concern is to reassure their sense of safety and security. Preschoolers will be worried about their lives, their families and their daily routines. If you need to talk about what happened with your preschooler, start with a question to determine what she already knows and what her concerns may be. Ask questions such as:

- "What do you think happened?"
- "That looked scary when that building fell down. What do you think about that?"
- "What worries you?"

Answer questions truthfully, using simple, factual language. Use the child's words as much as possible. Remember that children's primary concern will be their own safety and security, so be as patient and reassuring as possible. Say things such as:

- "Some very bad people did some very bad things and a lot of people got hurt and died."
- "The grown-ups who care about you are trying very hard to keep you safe and protect you."

- "Some people were very angry and did terrible things."
- "I feel sad and mad that people could hurt other people like this."
- "Hurting other people is never a good way to solve problems."

School-aged Children

School-aged children, ages 5 to 8, are curious and imaginative, relentlessly demanding information and details. Though they are able to understand more complex ideas, they still may have difficulty distinguishing between fact and opinion, exaggeration and truth. They are concerned less about fantasy and pretend and more about real-life events. Fears are very common among school-aged children. Younger children may still be afraid of monsters or the dark, while older children often begin to fear things such as disaster and death. Children these ages are beginning to learn skills to resolve conflict and solve problems peacefully.

Regardless of whether you have exposed your school-aged child to what happened, he has probably heard something about it from his friends, at school or on the news. Because he may be getting information from so many sources, it is especially important that you initiate conversation with your child and help him sort out his thoughts and feelings. Begin with a question to determine what he has seen and heard and how he understands it. Ask questions such as:

- "What have you heard about what happened in New York and Washington, D.C.?"
- "Have your teachers or friends at school talked about what happened?"
- "Do you worry about what happened? What exactly worries you?"
- "Do you have any ideas why someone would do something so horrible?"

School-aged children worry about the safety and security of themselves, their families and their friends. Address their worries and concerns in a simple, direct way, explaining the facts as they happened. Say things such as:

- "Some people were very angry and flew an airplane into the building. The building collapsed and buried many people. Many people died in the plane crash and when the building collapsed."
- "I think a lot of children are wondering if more buildings will fall or planes will crash."
- "Adults all over are doing whatever they can to make things safer for all of us who live here."
- "Terrorists are people who scare others by killing people and destroying property."
- "I don't know why people would do something like this, but there are people who are working really hard to figure out how to keep us safe."
- "I was shocked when I heard what happened and very sad that someone could do something so horrible."
- "It is wrong to solve problems this way."
- "A war is when countries fight and one way that countries solve problems."
- "Sometimes the world is a scary place, but there are people who are working really hard to figure out what they can do to protect us better."

Preadolescent

Preadolescent children, ages 9 to 12, are beginning to understand abstract concepts

and are interested in issues of right vs. wrong. They understand that there are consequences to behaviors, and they grasp the permanence of death and loss. They are concerned about fairness and punishment. Children at this age may resist sharing their thoughts and feelings, especially with adults. At this age, many children use humor inappropriately and may be insensitive to the needs of others as they sort through their own feelings. To focus the conversation in a way that is most relevant to preadolescent children, ask questions such as:

- "What do you know about what happened to our nation?"
- "What have you heard about terrorism?"
- "What sorts of things do you think might happen as a result of this?"

Preadolescent children may not want to talk about what happened. Consider sharing some of your own feelings to stimulate conversation, and discuss topics such as anger management and conflict resolution. Say things such as:

- "I was really scared when I saw those planes fly into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I was worried that it was going to happen in more places, and more people would be hurt."
- "It is hard to understand why anyone would want to do something like this, but there are some people in the world who do terrible things because of hate."
- "Terrorists are people who try to scare and intimidate others by killing and destroying."
- "War and fighting are never good ways to solve problems because innocent people get hurt, but sometimes it is the only way."
- "I was offended by your jokes, especially since I am so sad."
- "Let's think about ways we can help."

Older adolescent

Teen-agers, ages 13 and older, are able to understand complex issues, and many of them will be able to discuss the events that occurred on the same level as an adult. Teen-agers need to explore issues to develop their own views, and they typically enjoy discussing moral and philosophical topics. Teen-agers are concerned about the future, fairness and justice. Events such as these enhance their vulnerability and threaten their sense of security and hope for the future. Begin a dialogue with teens by asking questions to determine their feelings and concerns. Ask questions such as:

- "How do you feel about what happened?"
- "What do you think motivates a terrorist?"
- "When is war OK?" or "Is war ever OK?"
- "Why would someone kill themselves and so many others for a cause?"
- "Are you worried that there will be a war?"
- "I would like to contribute to the relief efforts. Do you have any ideas?"

Teenagers are examining their ideology of war and peace and have many philosophical questions and concerns. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss complex issues such as violence, racism, hate, war, religion and politics. Keep in mind that teen-agers may ask you for details about the events or the circumstances and may enjoy debating their views with you, but they often prefer sharing feelings and grieving with their peers. When talking with your teen, say things such as:

- "Our country cannot tolerate acts of terrorism and hatred."
- "The government and world leaders are taking a stand against this kind of

violence and there might be a war."

- "The United States can become safer and stronger as a result of this tragedy."
- "All of us need to find peaceful ways to solve problems."
- "It is never acceptable to categorize a group of people based on race, ethnicity, religion, sex or any other characteristic. That leads to prejudice."
- "I am devastated about what has happened in New York City. Thousands of innocent people died."
- "I am encouraged by all of the patriotism and heroism we have seen in our country since the attack."

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