



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Helping Children Cope With Terror

Comfort, Talk, Assure

Adults Key To Recovery After Traumatic Event

Helping children cope with the terrorist attacks of September 11 and ongoing threats of terror poses a challenge to parents and professionals, but it is not unfamiliar ground.

Past tragedies – natural disasters, plane crashes, previous acts of terror, such as the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and others – provide lessons for guiding children through today’s trying times.

Among the most important is that adults influential in the lives of children need to react calmly and responsibly to the crisis.

Studies suggest that following a tragedy, children’s prospects for recovery improve when they have a supportive, safe, and healthy home. But adults who languish in grief and anger make it more difficult for children to cope.

Experts say adults should model calm, be understanding, maintain as normal a routine as possible, and encourage children to talk about their worries. To do that, adults must first understand their own emotional state.

“It is important for parents to show they are in control, particularly parents of young children,” said Emie Titnich, Infant and Child Development Specialist, Pittsburgh Early Head Start. “Maybe we can’t say something like, ‘September 11 won’t ever happen again,’ but we shouldn’t portray helplessness.”

Another important early step is for adults to gently ask children what they know about the traumatic event. Such knowledge helps adults assess a child’s

level of awareness and understanding and provides an opportunity to correct misinformation.

Comfort Of Home

Having a parent or other trusted adult around in a time of crisis comforts a child and gives adults an opportunity to observe the child’s behavior and emotional state.

Comfort is essential and comes in many forms: hugs and kisses, letting a child sit close to you, and cuddling, to name a few.

Taking extra time to read or playing quiet games before bed are the kinds of activities that foster a sense of closeness and security and reinforce a feeling of normalcy.

Lines Of Communication

Communication, important to any healthy parent-child relationship, is particularly important in times of crisis.

Parents should ask and listen. They

Related Reports

No hard and fast rules dictate how children will react to traumatic events. But age, degree of exposure, and the response of adults closest to them are very influential.

See Report 42

should never treat any fear as silly. And they should be available to inform and comfort.

Experts offer a few guidelines:

- Offer age-appropriate explanations. Young children need brief, simple information balanced with reassurances and dispensed on a “need to know” basis. Upper elementary school children may need help separating fact from fantasy.
- Tell the truth. Children may become worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
- Don’t embellish facts or speculate about what has happened or might happen. Don’t dwell on the scope of the tragedy with young children.
- Listen to children’s thoughts and concerns.

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- Respect a child's wish not to talk about particular issues until he or she is ready.
- Adults should regulate their own conversations, being careful to avoid generalizations about groups that tend to dehumanize a situation.

Giving Assurances

Assuring children that they are safe is one of the easiest and most beneficial actions adults can take during times of crisis and tragedy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that considering what children may have seen on television or heard from any number of sources, they need to know the violence is isolated to certain areas and they will not be harmed.

Children take comfort in hearing adults say they have done everything they can to keep them safe. Giving them facts about how people are protected – by police and fire departments, for example – along with instructing them on safety measures also helps.

Adults should never criticize children for being afraid.

Monitor TV Viewing

News of terrorist attacks and other large-scale tragedies can itself be traumatic. Print and broadcast news reports of the September 11 attacks, for example, offered countless images depicting the horror, fear and anger of the day that were shocking even to adults.

It is unwise, experts say, to let children young and old view footage of such events over and over. And if they do watch the news, it is best that a parent or other trusted adult watch with them and discuss what they see.

Schools Can Help, Too

A child should come to see school

as safe harbor, just like the home.

The National Association of School Psychologists reports schools can take several steps to help. For example, it is important for school to:

- Maintain structure and stability within the schools.
- Have a plan for the first days back at school and include school psychologists, counselors, and a crisis team in planning the response.
- Give teachers and parents information about what to say and do

to help children.

- Identify and monitor students who recently experienced a personal tragedy or have a personal connection to victims of the event.
 - Inventory community resources for children who may need support.
 - Allow time for age appropriate classroom discussion and activities.
- Above all, said Titnich, "We need to show children that life goes on – that you might be sad or afraid, but life goes on."

references

This report and Report 42 (December 2001) were based on information from several sources, including those listed below. Further information on children and traumatic events can be found by visiting the following Internet web sites.

- American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org). The site posts summaries of information on the roles of parents and pediatricians in helping children in the aftermath of traumatic events.
- Child Advocate (www.childadvocate.net/disaster.htm). Site contains suggestions for helping children cope with disaster and tragedy.
- National Association of School Psychologists (www.nasponline.org). Site offers suggestions in an article: *Helping Children Cope With Tuesday's Acts of Terrorism: Tips for Parents and Teachers*.
- National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov). Offers articles and research summaries on school violence and helping children cope after witnessing violent events.
- Children Now (www.childrennow.org). Organization offers detailed information and advice regarding children and their response to news reports and media violence.
- Penn State Cooperative Extension (<http://agexted.cas.psu.edu/fcs/dp/fypr.html>). Extension provides a listing of online resources dealing with children and traumatic events.

contacts

- Emie Titnich, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, Infant and Child Development Specialist, Early Head Start. Contact: Sharon Blake, University of Pittsburgh Office of News and Information, (412) 624-4364.

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OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall.

background Editor: Jeffery Fraser (412) 731-6641; e-mail: jd.fraser@att.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, 121 University Place, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; (412) 624-7425; fax: (412) 624-4551

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