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How to Help your Child Cope: with Terror and the Threat of War

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In the days following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, many parents worried about what to tell their children.

As time passed, we continued to be inundated by images of “Ground Zero,” grieving families, biological warfare and bombings on the other side of the world. Collectively, we are all still holding our breath. Children’s responses to crises are often influenced by the responses of the adults around them. How do adults convey a sense of security and normalcy to their children when they feel uncertain and insecure themselves?

Adults and children have some very common responses to war and the threat of war. The most common of these is fear. Children have common fears, and in themselves, these are not signs of abnormal development. Young children of four to six begin to fantasize and pretend, which gives them the ability to imagine the worst, and their fears (of the dark, of strangers, for their parents’ safety) can escalate. As the school years advance and children continue to develop cognitively, irrational fears tend to decrease and more specific fears (often based on personal experiences), tend to increase, e.g., fears of school, or of injury, or of nuclear war. Common, developmental fears can be heightened by the real experiences of the child. During times of terrorist attacks and war, children’s fantasies can exaggerate

these fears, but they are based on real images and knowledge of real events. Other emotions and themes are also predictable responses to the threat of war. Adults and children both feel a loss of control. A common reaction to this is a heightened need to control other aspects of one’s life, and some children may appear wilful, argumentative, and defiant over minor issues. Adults and children both feel a loss of stability at times such as these. Children are particularly sensitive to disrupted routines and, even when a parent is feeling anxious, they can greatly increase their child’s sense of safety in the world by maintaining consistent routines. This is particularly important for young children, and for those with conditions that require structure (e.g., children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, anxious children, children with developmental delays). Anger is another common response to the threat of war in children, and it is often directed at those who are close (parents, siblings, friends), or at those who the child perceives are associated with the threat in some way, such as some classmates and neighbours. Children who tend to externalize their feelings may be more likely to show angry responses to these kinds of threats. It is important to remember, especially for these children, that anger is generally the second emotion, a response to a more vulnerable feeling such as anxiety or sadness.

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What should parents and other caring adults do?

It is important to create a comfort level with your child that allows him or her to share their feelings openly, through words as well as non-verbally, (e.g., through their artwork or through play). Expect that your child is going to have emotional reactions to the present world events, and that these may not disappear quickly. Be careful to not shame your child or suggest that it is wrong, abnormal, or irrational to have this feeling. Acknowledgement of feelings, empathy, support, feeling loved, feeling personally safe, and having strategies to help deal with difficult emotions, are all critical in an individual's ability to cope with these kinds stressors, regardless of whether that individual is an adult or child. You can usually open the door by letting your child know that you notice they seem upset and you wonder if they are having a hard time. A hug can often be more reassuring than any words.

Some parents try to protect their child from painful feelings, and see themselves as the ongoing, primary source of reassurance and comfort (e.g., allowing a child to stay in the house if they are afraid of going out or to school). This can inadvertently communicate to the child that there really is a reason to be so afraid, and that the only way for the child to cope is to depend on the presence of the parent. Fears, like so many other stressors and obstacles in life, can be challenges that foster growth. Thus, it's important to stay calm and be supportive of your child without minimizing or heightening their feelings. Your task is to teach your child how to cope and to convey your confidence in their growing ability to do just that.

It is important to limit media coverage, particularly for young children. Older children and adolescents need opportunities at school and home to process the information they take in, and to help understand what is happening in their world, and how it affects them. Even adolescents and adults need to limit their viewing of disturbing, graphic

images and themes. Repeated exposure to such stimuli can be traumatizing for anyone.

Play is the “work” of very young children, their way of making sense of their world. Parents should not be alarmed if a young child's play seems to incorporate more themes of war, or even of terrorist attacks, during this time. When young children have questions about war, answer them simply, briefly, and honestly, without offering unnecessary detail or information that exceeds their understanding. With young children, such conversations may only last for seconds; don't be surprised or concerned if your child wanders off and gets involved in something else immediately afterward.

Help your child learn how to modulate difficult or scary feelings by distraction and soothing. Engaging in a productive or enjoyable activity may suffice, such as going for a bike ride, listening to relaxing music, or immersing oneself in a good book or movie. Often, however, children (and adults) need to do something more specific such as using deep breathing or other relaxation techniques or guided imagery. On a more ongoing basis, one's stress tolerance and resilience are developed by learning a variety of coping, self-soothing strategies, as well as by drawing on strength through connections with family and friends, and through one's spirituality/faith and connections with the community.

Children who are from ethnic, racial, or religious groups that have a perceived association with the perpetrators of terrorist attacks may be particularly vulnerable to bullying, racism, and backlash at this time and may be especially fearful. Due to a number of factors, children and teenagers in Moslem, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities in Canada often do not alert their parents or teachers to their concerns; they often suffer in silence and isolation. Parents, extended family, teachers, and community supports need to strive to invite the trust of such children and youth, offering dialogue and support as needed. Specific concerns for safety need to be addressed

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(e.g., create specific safety plans if your child or teen is being harassed or intimidated at school or in the community; ensure they get a ride to school or not walk alone, etc.). Encourage the reporting of bullying and the use of the police whenever there are real concerns of safety. Community-based agencies, mosques, temples and Gurdwaras may wish to provide forums for young people to share their feelings and work out plans to get support. Invite conversation with your child about the reverberations of current events in a multicultural society, i.e., talk with them about the fact that terrorism is a complex issue, and that it's about hate at an individual level, with faulty generalizations made that appear to target certain groups of individuals. It is important that we do not make the same kinds of faulty generalizations in our response, judging others based on religion, dress, colour of skin, or ethnicity.

Global events such as the present crisis can provide an opportunity to learn more about the world, about the universality of the human condition, about the resilience and generosity of the human spirit, and the power of the actions of individuals.

Help your child channel some of their feelings into productive actions such as donating time or money to relief projects, or to other, community-based charities. If your child continues to experience problems with fear, depression or anger despite your support and interventions, consider seeking the intervention of a mental health professional.

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