

Helping Children to Cope with Terrorism
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Many parents have an assortment of questions regarding how to interact with their children following terrorist attacks. The purpose of this article is to address some of these concerns.

By way of introduction, it seems important to mention three things. First, most children exposed to trauma, even that which is repeated over time, do not develop a psychiatric condition. Children can be surprisingly resilient. Second, advice from mental health professionals is generally most effective when it supports and informs, but does not supplant, parental intuition. Your relationship with your child makes you extremely knowledgeable about his or her needs. Third, some of the suggestions below would not apply for children who have become symptomatic; for such children it would be best to consult with a mental health professional in order to develop a tailored plan.

How do I speak to my children about terrorist acts?

Guideline #1: Intermittently let your children know that you are available to talk but do not try to force a conversation.

Children are like adults; sometimes we cope by trying to put something out of our mind for a while. Your child might not be in the mood to talk about intense feelings and thoughts at the same time as you. Following your child's lead can communicate that you are sensitive and respectful.

Guideline #2: Try to create a venue and manner that makes it easier for your child to communicate with you.

For instance, teenagers might find it easier to discuss difficult feelings and thoughts when eye contact is not required (e.g., while driving or waiting for a movie to start) while younger children may communicate the best through their play. Regardless of the age range, though, it is important to not jump in too quickly with reassurances, be they expressed in words or play. Once a parent starts self-disclosing, even if for the purpose of being reassuring, it can have a dampening effect on the child's self-disclosure.

Once your child has finished with his or her initial statements reflect back what you have heard and provide empathy for what your child has expressed; this suggests an additional delay for your own self-disclosure. Expressions of empathy (e.g., "I understand why you could be feeling more scared these days") may lead your child to tell you even more. When it seems that your child is

concluded that would be the time to offer your own thoughts, feelings and reassurances.

Guideline #3: Let your awareness of your child's developmental level guide your self-disclosure.

No matter your child's age, it is important to not say things that you do not really believe. This approach is often ineffective and may damage your credibility. Selective truth telling would seem to be advisable; selective based upon your child's developmental level.

For younger children the parent may want to only share those thoughts and feelings that are positive (even fearful adults have positive and hopeful thoughts). For older children the parent may choose to share some thoughts and feelings that are unpleasant; for older adolescents the choice may be to be quite open about sharing a spectrum of feelings and thoughts. Sometimes life is painful; honestly acknowledging that, with an older child who can handle it, can be educative and facilitate a closer relationship.

What do I say to my children about our safety?

Much of this will be determined by how you *rationally* answer this question for yourself. What do you believe the odds are of being aboard a hijacked plane? What is the chance that your family will experience a direct assault? Once you have answered these questions for yourself, the selective truth telling principal, mentioned above, may be the best approach with your child.

Is there anything I can do to protect my children from all the fallout?

The following suggestions may help:

- Aggressively pursue your own adjustment. A parent who is afflicted will have a harder time helping a child.
- Try to maintain functional rituals and routines. Few things give a child a clearer message that life is safe than adaptive routines and rituals (e.g., meal times, bed time, holidays, birthdays, etc.).
- Keep your child's developmental level in mind when deciding how much he or she should have access to ongoing developments in the news.
- Try to turn a sense of passivity into an active plan for healing and helping. The family may pray for the suffering, make donations, write letters, create art, join community efforts to heal and to help, etc.

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle for the entire family. This would include things like spending time having fun together each week and maintaining good diet and exercise schedules.
- If your child seems to be having a hard time adjusting, or otherwise has changed for the worse, seek out a professional consultation. Doing so may improve your child's adjustment.