



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Helping Children Cope With Terrorism

Tips for Families and Educators

Acts of violence that hurt innocent people are frightening and upsetting. Children and youth will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As horrible as these events are, children need to know that acts of terrorism are extremely rare in the United States. As information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and help them to learn how to cope with other life challenges.

All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing unnecessarily anxious or frightened.
2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the important adults and other loved ones in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help ensure their immediate safety and that of their community.
3. **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, and the government are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies like this occur.
4. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. While you do not want to force children to do so, let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
5. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening. At the same time, however, don't offer unasked for details. Let children's questions be your guide.
6. **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and who might be responsible. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
7. **Be careful not to stereotype people that might be associated with the violence.** Children can easily generalize negative statements and develop prejudice. Talk about tolerance and justice versus vengeance. ***Stop any bullying or teasing immediately.***

8. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. **Upper elementary and early middle school** children may be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. **Upper middle school and high school** students may have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. They may share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. ***For all children, encourage (but don't force) them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!***
9. **Maintain a "normal" routine.** To the extent possible stick to normal classroom or family routines but don't be inflexible. Some children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
10. **Monitor or restrict viewing** scenes of the event as well as the aftermath. This should include viewing scenes of the event by social media. For older children, caution against accessing news coverage from only one source.
11. **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express fear or grief.
12. **Be aware of children at greater risk.** Children who were physically close to or knew someone affected by this particular event, have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Be observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.
13. **Provide an outlet for students' desire to help.** Consider making get well cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy, or writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals as well as emergency rescue workers, firefighters and police.
14. **Keep lines of communication open between home and school.** Schools are a good place for children to experience a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers is helpful. Schools should inform families about available resources, such as talking points or counseling, and plans for information sharing and discussions with students. Parents should let their child's teacher or school mental health professional know if they have concerns or feel their child may need extra support.
15. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, upset, or anxious; but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.