

Talking to Children About Terrorism by Linda Goldman

Children's reactions to terrorism, war, anthrax, and the perceived loss of safety and protection provide a window into their psyches and help suggest ways the adults around them can help. Our ability to listen to questions, thoughts and feelings are paramount in creating a safe zone for our children to process these life-changing times they are living through.

Explaining Terrorism, Trauma, and War

One question weighing heavily on the minds of parents, educators, and mental health professionals is: "How do we talk to our children about war, terrorism, prejudice, biochemical attack, and nuclear destruction? Boys and girls are plagued by questions. "Is anthrax in my mail?" "Was the plane destroyed by terrorists?" "What is smallpox?" and "When is the next attack?"

Many kids who usually like to draw and write, seem reluctant to do so. They appear shy and explain this is too hard to do or they are not ready. Young children may not process information they see or hear accurately. We can ask, "What do you think happened with the terrorists attack?"

One-four-year old thought the terrorists destroyed hundreds of buildings because he repeatedly viewed tapes of the plane crashing into the towers, thinking every tape was a new attack. Carlos, a five-year-old living in El Salvador, began to cry to his grandmother as they talked on the telephone. After watching the plane crash on TV, he explained to her, "Grandma you live in New York. Now that the plane crashed I'll never be able to come and visit America!" He thought the plane he saw blow up was the only plane to take people to the United States. The following are examples of definitions helpful to initiate dialogue with children.

Create Words to Use

Terrorism is an act or acts of violence, abuse, murder, or devastation against unsuspecting people and countries by a person or group of people that believe their cause is more important than human life or property. Their feeling of "being right" is more important to them (sometimes) than their own life. Terrorists can be big or small, black or white, or any color, American or foreign. Their goal is to create terror, disruption, and vulnerability.

Trauma is an experience that can be scary and difficult. It may create feelings of fear, anger, rage, and revenge. A trauma can be a death of someone close to us, caused by a car accident or a terrorist bombing. It can also be from knowing something scary that happened on TV, or to someone we know, or even to a stranger we see on a news video.

Creating A Dialogue

When creating dialogues with children, use accurate, real, and age-appropriate language avoiding clichés or denial of their experience. Concentrate on giving the facts, keeping responses to questions simple and age-appropriate. Especially with young children, minimize the scope of the tragedy, without contemplating with them what did or may happen.

Keeping explanations developmentally appropriate allows children to process this experience at their own level. Young elementary school children need simple information balanced with reassurance that trustworthy adults are bringing stability to their day-to-day life. Middle school children may seek out more facts and want to know more about their safety what is being done to keep them safe and healthy at home, school, and in the community. High school students may more strongly voice opinions about what happened and why, and need to develop ways to combat terrorism, rationalize war, and prevent world annihilation. (Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists, NASP www.nasponline.org.)

Telling children the truth in an age-appropriate way is very important. They often have a conscious or unconscious knowing of events happening around them and can sense the impact of the terrorist trauma on the adult world. One mom shared just such an experience in the car with her four-year-old son, Andy. She shared she was “sneaking” a listen of the news on the day of the attack. As the reporter began talking about the destruction of the World Trade Center, she quickly turned it off so Andy couldn’t hear. Andy immediately explained his level of awareness: “Mommy, they are talking about the plane crash that blew up buildings today.”

If Andy was then told his experience wasn’t real, he may have begun to doubt himself and/or the adult world and question his mother’s truthfulness. If Andy felt his mom was hiding the truth about what happened, he might worry more because his mom was too afraid to tell him what really happened. Either way, Andy may have another loss—the loss of the trust in the adult world.

Prepare children for dialogue

Reassure children that what they are feeling is very common. Emphasize to them that adults are feeling the same things that they are. Remind them that everyone has different ways of showing their feelings and that is OK. Restore confidence by reassuring them that problems are being handled, people who were hurt are being cared for, buildings are being cleared, and that things are getting a little better each day.

Carlos gets scared every time the mail comes to the house. “Don’t touch it without gloves and a mask!” he screamed at his dad. The threat of anthrax was very great where he lived in New York City. We can reframe some of that fear into a feeling of protection by saying gloves and masks protect the postal workers and other people while we check to make sure our post offices and mail are safe from anthrax.

Accept Children’s Reactions

While there are several commonly seen reactions to trauma in children, these reactions range widely. Some children will listen to your explanation and then go out to play. Others will want to

stay near you and talk about it for a length of time, or maybe ask you to drive them to school instead of taking the bus. Still others may be angry that adults can't immediately fix the problem.

Children can use many activities to safely tell their story. Props like fireman and police hats, doctor kits, toy soldiers, and hand puppets can be used to re-enact the tragedy and war. Toys, puppets, art, clay modeling, collage, letter writing, journaling, and other projective play can be used for role-play and expression of emotions. Positive visualizations and breathing exercises can help kids to relax.

Activities to Help Children Participate in World Events

Children can create rituals that allow commemoration and avenues to voice feelings. Lighting candles, planting flowers, writing letters, raising money for victims, or saying prayers for survivors or world peace allow children to be recognized mourners. Thirteen year-old Helen lived in a New Jersey community where many families, especially those of fire fighters and police, had been deeply affected by the World Trade Center disaster. "Let's make brownies," she told her younger brother and sister, "and sell them to raise money for the firemen. Everybody likes brownies."

The terrorist attack has transformed us all into a nation weeping for the loss of our people, our property, our freedom, and our safety. It has transformed us all into a nation of grieving children. It has transformed us all into a global community joining together to re-instill protection and a sense of safety for America and for the world. Helping our children grieve can only help the grieving child in each one of us.

This article is an adaptation from Linda Goldman's book [Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children With Complicated Grief](#), 2nd edition, (2001). This article, or any part thereof may not be reproduced without express permission of Linda Goldman, 7801 Connecticut Avenue, Chevy Chase, Maryland 20815. To contact Linda Goldman, e-mail her at lgold@erols.com

This article appears on our website with permission from Linda Goldman. It was printed in the Fall 2002 issues of Wings. Please respect the reprint policy.