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## Chapter 7

# Addressing Tough Topics and Questions: Talking to Children About Traumatic Events

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Children ask a lot of tough questions. Questions about acts of terrorism, war and natural disasters are some of the hardest to answer. Particularly when the news provides immediate and graphic details, parents wonder if they should protect their children from the grim reality, explore the topic or share their personal beliefs. Professionals and teachers also wonder how much information to provide or how to help children if they are confused, troubled or asking tough questions. The following section addresses some concerns and questions parents and school professionals have about talking to children about terrorism, war and natural disasters.

Contrary to parents' fears, talking about violent acts or threatening events will not increase a child's fear. It is very important to engage in an open discussion about children's feelings, fears and worries related to war and terrorism. Avoiding discussion of scary feelings may be more damaging than talking about them. However, as with other topics, consider the age and developmental level of the child when entering into a discussion. Even children as young as four or five know about violent acts, but not all children may know how to talk about their feelings and concerns. Additionally, it is important to consider the child's personality style, such as whether the child is fearful or anxious by nature, when talking about stressful life events.

### **TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT TERRORIST ATTACKS, WAR OR NATURAL DISASTERS**

**Be aware of time and place** Although it is important to respond to questions when they arise, parents and school professionals are encouraged to have a discussion

with children without external distractions. The child should be given time and attention to discuss his/her perceptions, understanding, fears, worries and concerns. For example, if the conversation arises in the supermarket, the parent is encouraged to tell his/her child that he/she is glad that the topic came up, and that they will go home and discuss it over ice cream. Similarly, if a child brings up the topic in a classroom setting which is not conducive to the discussion, a school professional is encouraged to discuss the matter in private with the child after class.

**Take the first step** It is often necessary for the adults in the child's life to initiate the dialogue themselves. A good starting point is to ask what the child has heard or seen. Parents or professionals can follow up by asking what the child thinks and feels about what he/she has heard or seen.

### **Look for opportunities to start a discussion**

Adults should look for opportunities for discussion as they arise; for example, when watching the news together or when reading the newspaper. They can also look for other occasions when related topics are discussed, such as when people in a television show are arguing or a movie about war is on television.

### **Focus on the children's feelings and thoughts**

Parents and school professionals should provide children with an opportunity to openly talk about their perceptions, thoughts and feelings about terrorism and war without judgment or suggestion. It is important to explore and understand how the child sees the situation and what is important, confusing and troublesome to the child. Parents and adults should refrain from lecturing or teaching about the issues.



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**Listen to and address children's feelings** Adults are often surprised by a child's concerns or fears. Addressing a child's particular and personal fears is necessary. Parents and school personnel should not make assumptions about children's thoughts, concerns or worries.

**Reassure children** Do not dismiss a child's feelings. Children can feel embarrassed or criticized when their fears are minimized. Exploring the issues and finding positive ways of coping help children master their fear and anxiety. Reassure children with facts about how people are protected (e.g., the police) and individual safety measures that can be taken (e.g., creating a hurricane preparedness plan). Avoid "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information. Maintaining routines and structure is also reassuring to children and helps normalize an event and restore a sense of safety.

**Provide facts and information** Once there has been some exploration about the child's concerns and feelings, parents and school professionals should provide children with the facts and basic information about terrorism, acts of war and natural disasters. The amount of information shared should be consistent with the child's age and maturity. In these discussions, children can be told what is realistic and what is not, and their fears and concerns should be realistically appeased. Parents and other adults, however, should not misinform children and provide them with a false sense of safety.

**Model open discussion** It is sometimes helpful for children and adolescents to open up about their thoughts and feelings. This can be achieved by the important adults in their lives taking the lead and facilitating a discussion while sharing their own thoughts and feelings. By sharing their own feelings and thoughts, these adults can help children feel that their thoughts are normal, and can help them feel that they are not alone in their concerns and fears. However, adults must monitor their communication and be careful to avoid making generalizations about groups of individuals which dehumanizes the situation. It is also important, however, that adults do not burden children with their own fears and concerns.

**Provide a forum for the child to initiate the discussion and ask questions** Answering questions and addressing fears does not necessarily happen all at once in one sit-down session. New issues may arise or become apparent over time and discussion about war and terrorism should be done on an ongoing and as-needed basis.