

Answering Questions Children have about Tragedy and Violence

Children often have numerous questions during times of crisis. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers frequently ask about ways to discuss violence and tragedies with children.

How do I deal with the different emotions that children may have about tragic and violent issues?

It is natural and healthy for children to experience a wide range of emotions about any particular tragedy. Some children will be sad, anxious and even fearful for their own families' safety, others will be confused about how to make sense of the events and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions: fear, sorrow and worry, for example.

Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary-school children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary- and middle-school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation.

Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide reassurance, while in other areas our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure children, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much they care about others and the world around them. You can express that it is this caring that makes you proud and gives you strength and hope.

After I have listened to children's concerns, how do I respond?

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what is on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and help them distinguish fantasy from reality. When we have listened to what they think and feel, we can gently correct their misinformation by statements about what happened at the World Trade Center like, "By the way, it is not true that this has happened in lots of other cities."

We can also answer children's direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. A child who asks, "How did the people in those buildings die?" or "What does hijacking mean?" deserves a factual answer. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent, such as underlying confusion or unexpressed anxiety, ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's questions.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not clear and straightforward. When children ask such questions as, "Why did people do this?" we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another. It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict.

Finally, we can give our children the opportunity to continue to explore their questions and to learn from this conflict. For instance, war play is a common phenomenon, particularly among young boys. Many use it to further explore and work out what they are hearing in regard to a violent situation. Some schools decide that war play is not appropriate on school grounds. If children we know are engaging in war play, we can utilize it as an opportunity to discuss what the games mean to them. If we are disturbed by it, we can share with them any concerns we have about that form of play.

For older children and adolescents, the World Trade Center crisis and others raise important issues about the ethics of violence, the ways conflicts are best resolved and insuring school security. For adolescents concerned about their own potential involvement, it raises questions about their own options and choices. These are important issues for young people to talk about and think through with adults they trust.

At the same time, young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution and developing concrete skills in resolving conflict nonviolently. This is an opportunity for them to explore alternative means of resolving conflicts and ways that, even when a conflict becomes violent, people continue to work toward its resolution. In addition, it would be valuable for them to think about how they may pursue a constructive response that promotes peace and security in their schools and neighborhoods.

Should I share my beliefs with children?

Because the opinions of adults in a child's life carry such weight (especially with younger children), we recommend that you focus on what the child is thinking and feeling. Stating an opinion, especially in the early stages of discussion, can block open communication by preventing children who hold different opinions from openly sharing and discussing them for fear of disapproval. Since most older children are aware of their parents' opinions anyway, it is perhaps more important to help children to think critically about many points of view and arrive at their own well thought-out conclusions.

However, it is important to communicate to children the value of hearing other points of view and respecting the people who hold them. Helping children understand that the issue of violence, for example, is a complex one allows them to feel that their opinions can make a contribution to our understanding of the issue. We recommend that you stress the importance of their examining a variety of points of view, as well as your own, and their learning to appreciate what each has to offer.

Difference of opinion can be very healthy, and something from which both adults and children can learn. Often, however, these differences degenerate into unproductive arguments where both the adult and child become entrenched even more in their positions. Constructive dialogue begins with a good deal of listening and a sincere effort to understand what the other person is saying and why he or she sees it as valid. It is important to avoid statements that categorically diminish the adolescent's opinions such as "When you grow up you will understand that" or "You don't know what you're talking about." Instead, restate what the child has said to make sure you understand it. Listen carefully to the child's point of view, and ask questions to help him or her clarify it. Rather than countering those statements with which you disagree, ask questions that can help you understand the child's perspective.

There are respectful ways of disagreeing that you can model by stating your disagreements in the form of, "I experience things differently. I think that . . ." rather than telling the child that he or she is wrong. The goal, after all, is not to dictate opinions to children, but rather to help them make their own reasoned decisions about controversial issues. Finally, help your child understand that a person's opinions can change and that a decision reached today might be different tomorrow with the addition of new ideas and information.

How can I talk with children if I feel that my own grasp of the facts and issues is inadequate?

Fortunately, we do not need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers. When older children ask for information we do not have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together." The process of figuring out where to get the information and going through the steps to obtain it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child's questions do not lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, "I don't know the answer to that, and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many good thinkers throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

How can I reassure and comfort children when I honestly do not feel hopeful myself?

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group is not practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

What can I say that is both comforting and reassuring?

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to hear calmly even their wildest concerns, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they do not have to be alone with their concerns.

You can also help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer and that the most effective antidote to anxiety, fear or powerlessness is action. Engage them in a conversation about the way in which their school is working to make it a more peaceful place and explore ways in which they might be an active part of the effort to create a peaceful community in their school, home and neighborhood.

Contributed by Educators for Social Responsibility.

Resources

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- American Pediatric Society: www.aps-spr.org

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