

Talking to Children About Terrorism

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension

Children, especially young children, may experience challenging emotions when faced with stress resulting from exposure to terrorist acts or mass violence. From the tragedy of Sept. 11 to mass shootings at schools or public places to terrorist events that occur in other parts of the world (for example, Israel, France, London, Pakistan), exposure to terrorism and its graphic results is a difficult experience for many children. Parents and other adults can best support children through kindness, understanding and reassurance.

What is Terrorism?

The face of violence is complex. Children see the reactions of parents and other adults to terrorism and feel the anxiety and confusion that result from such events.

Terrorism essentially consists of the systematic or planned use of violence or the threat of violence toward civilians, groups or societies with the intent to kill, injure, harm, coerce or intimidate through fear and terror, often in pursuit of political or ideological goals.

Although it has a long history, terrorism in the world appears to have increased in recent decades in its frequency, sophistication and impact. Media coverage of terrorist events has increased significantly and public responses from government and other entities have expanded, so children are more likely not only to be exposed to terrorism but to experience ongoing awareness of its effects.

Children see adults absorbed in the news coverage. They listen to parents or teachers discussing personalities associated with terrorism or items in the news. Children often want to know what is happening, express concern and anxiety, and wonder why it is happening.

Responses of Children to Terrorism

Acts of human violence tend to create uncertainty, fear and insecurity in children. Terrorist acts often are similar in their impact on children to other disasters, which tend to be events that are quite sudden, very disruptive, lasting in their effects and public in their impact.

Children who express emotional strain due to terrorist incidents may be responding to at least four sources of stress:

- They are dealing with the sudden and unexpected confusion associated with such events.
- They may have to cope with weeks or months of continuing disturbance in life routines or mental patterns because of news media coverage, public security, etc.
- They may be responding to increased patterns of stress and difficulty that parents or other adults feel. Such stress can change the family's patterns and emotional atmosphere.
- They may be worrying about the possible impact on themselves or others they know. Children may internalize the events in a manner that reflects fear or anxiety.

How Adults Can Help Children Deal With Stress From Terrorism

Parents and other adults are critical in helping children deal with the stress of terrorist events in at least four ways. They provide an example for children, create a supportive environment, act as a resource, and give guidance and support in managing feelings.

- **First, as adults, set an example for children that helps them understand how to handle concerns about terrorist events or any other challenge.** Children look to parents or other adults for insight into how to respond to difficult circumstances or events. Set a supportive example for children. Avoid responding to current news updates in ways that are highly emotional or overly dramatic. Such reactions may upset children. Be informed but don't dwell at length on the latest events.
- **Second, create a supportive environment for children during highly stressful events.** Maintain

a sense of security in your own home and environment. It reassures children that they can continue to feel secure. Continue a healthy routine at home. Avoid letting the news coverage of current terrorist events be on television or radio constantly in the background. This creates tension and may overwhelm a child's sense of security.

- **Third, parents and other adults should be a resource for helping children cope as needed.** Express your concern for people living in areas where terrorist events take place, but also reassure children about their protection and safety. Answer your children's questions directly, but give them information that is appropriate to their age and maturity level. Listen to them if they want to express concerns.
- **Fourth, help children manage fears or uncertainty they might feel or express.** Parents and other adults need to be attentive to children's needs in helping them overcome fears or maintain a sense of trust and security.

Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8:

Common Reactions of Young Children

- Separation concerns or fears, clinging or searching for parents
- Tantrums or irritability
- Anger or aggression (yelling, threatening, hitting, etc.)
- Withdrawal or restlessness (isolation, change in normal routines)
- Repeated questions about the events
- Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, clinging to adults, wetting bed, etc.)
- Sleep or physical problems (disturbance of sleep, nightmares, stomach problems or other symptoms of physical distress)

What to Say and Do

- Ask children to share their thoughts and feelings with you. Let them know this is a topic they can ask questions about. Ask if they feel scared or angry, and let them know such feelings are normal and can be worked out.
- Allow repetitive questions and a search for understanding. Give honest and clear answers, such as, "Some people do harmful things" or "Bad actions hurt people."
- Monitor adult conversations around children. Avoid talking about enemies or violence because this can upset young children.
- Give children physical comfort and verbal reassurance of safety. Young children need to hear and feel messages of support and security.
- Help children express feelings through play, drawing or telling a story. Ask them about a story or picture related to events and what it means to them.
- Limit child's exposure to prolonged or intense media coverage of violence or terrorism incidents.

Awareness of Children at Risk Following Terrorism

In the aftermath of terrorist incidents, parents and other adults should be aware that some children are most likely to be at risk for problems needing attention. Children are most likely to suffer negative effects due to:

- **Physical proximity** – witnessing the event directly or being near the location of the incident
- **Emotional exposure** – having a family member or friend affected by the incident, especially if the person is hurt, missing or dead
- **Pre-existing mental health issues** – emotional or mental disturbances or anxieties already present in the child
- **Pre-existing loss or trauma experience** – previous experience with significant loss or trauma as a child
- **Parents with emotional strain** – living in a family situation with caregivers who are having difficulty coping or who have emotional challenges
- **Other family stressors** – being in a situation with other family stressors, such as divorce, unemployment or significant poverty
- **Extensive or repeated media exposure** – awareness due to repeated or extensive exposure of the events on television, radio, internet or other media sources

Talking to Adolescents (ages 9 to 13)

When talking to adolescents from ages 9 to 13:

Common Reactions of Adolescents

- Fears and anxiety, concern about being alone or what else might happen
- Anger or aggression toward siblings or peers, or toward parents preoccupied by dealing with stress
- Sadness about events and loss, isolation, tendency to withdraw
- Sleep or physical problems (disturbance of sleep or other symptoms of physical distress)
- Repetitive thoughts, questions about event, discussion and concern
- Exaggerated attempts to protect or help parents, other adults

What to Say and Do

- Encourage expression of feelings and listen carefully to children. Ask questions so a child can direct the conversation and you can assess the child's thoughts and feelings.
- Reassure children about their safety. Explain what you, as a parent, and others will do to provide security. However, do not ignore the terror associated with events. Acknowledge children's concerns for others.
- Monitor exposure to media coverage of terrorist events. Reduce exposure to television or radio coverage.
- Ask children what they know about an event and how they know it. They may have discussed events at school with peers or teachers. Find out if they have additional questions and correct misinformation they may have.
- Together read books or watch movies that involve dealing with challenges. Ask children what they think about the characters and how they respond.

- Allow children to participate in opportunities such as attending a memorial service, making a donation, providing community service or other appropriate activities.
- Show children an example of self-control and positive coping when such events occur. An example of maturity and caring will help children as they respond.

Talking to Teens (ages 14 to 18)

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18:

Common Reactions of Teens

- Numbness, shock, reliving of events
- Discouragement, disillusionment and pessimism about life, people
- Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, emotional distance and isolation
- Acting out, engaging in risky behaviors, substance use
- Fear of similar events, death, betrayal of the future, etc.
- Thoughts about the future, concern about well-being of themselves and others

What to Say and Do

- Encourage expression of feelings and listen. Allow for continuing discussion of events, give time to talk and provide reassurance.
- Discuss events with your teens. Assess how they feel about events and people associated with violent acts. Encourage thinking about "harmful acts" rather than "evil people" or groups, with the intent of avoiding stereotypes and recognizing that people have power to choose their acts toward others.
- Establish and maintain consistent routines that involve teens, such as regular meals, bedtime routines or playing family games.
- Develop a plan with teens for action if events that might affect the family or community occur. This may include knowledge of contact

information, awareness of first aid or simply a greater understanding of potential concerns.

- Involve teens in service activities. Contributing or assisting with responding to events, such as performing a service activity for people in need, can help them.
- Engage teens in activities that relieve stress. Suggestions might include walking or other types of exercise, listening to music or engaging in spiritual activities.
- Slow down and help teens appreciate the positive things in life. Terrorism aims to rob individuals and families of security and normalcy. Find hope in the kindness shared by a neighbor. Share happiness in moments of family warmth, humor, and caring words and gestures.

Recommended Resources

- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – Terrorism and War Resource Library**
www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Libraries/Terrorism_War_Resource_Library.aspx
- **Common Sense Media: "For Parents" link**
www.commonsensemedia.org
- **9/11 Memorial and Museum (online site with resources on 9/11 terrorist event and other resources)**
<https://911memorial.org/>
- **National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (a site for parents, children and educators on violence, terrorism and coping).**
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (fact sheets about talking to different aged children, understanding media exposure and restoring a sense of safety).**
www.nctsn.org/resources
- **National Association of School Psychologists: "Helping Children Cope with Terrorism" resource**
www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/war-and-terrorism/helping-children-cope-with-terrorism
- **NDSU Extension – Family Resources Page**
www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/family

Children and Images of Violence

Terrorist acts are intended specifically to spread fear and anxiety in the general population. This means acts of violence are calculated to shock and terrify, and individuals or groups may provide images and messages that further spread fear and concern.

Extensive news media coverage of images of violence worsens this problem and is a cause of concern for parents and other adults. Children witnessing or being exposed to images of terrorism and violence can suffer trauma and negative effects.

Some things to consider:

- **Help children establish a set of values to guide their responses and actions.** Guide children to develop values that look to the future, connect them to larger groups and encourage positive behavior. Discuss how to think about violent acts and ways to be empathic for people such acts affect.
- **Speak to a child's level of understanding.** Concepts raised by terrorism include distinctions between right and wrong, cultural values and moral behavior. Adapt your conversation to a child's level of understanding.
- **Avoid constant and harsh exposure to images of violence through television or other media.** Be aware of how much children see on TV or the internet, and set limits. Repeated exposure to images of violence can lead to trauma, anxiety or unhealthy responses.
- **Be available to discuss what your children see and help them make sense of disturbing images.** Discussion with children may help clarify the context of what they are seeing and help them understand what happened, rather than just seeing disturbing visual images.
- **Reduce exposure to images of violence in children's lives.** Feelings of fear and threats that occur due to exposure to violence can affect children negatively, even at the level of brain functioning and development. Limit exposure to violent images whether on television, in video games or movies, on the internet or in other contexts.
- **Teach children that alternatives to violence are available and discuss peaceful methods of action.** Emphasize that acts of violence committed for the purpose of terrorism are wrong and that alternative methods of dealing with problems exist. Learn about and discuss alternative options when conflict occurs.

References

- Brotherson, S.E. (2001). Extension and other resources for responding to terrorism of September 11, 2001 – Educators resource packet. Fargo, N.D.: NDSU Extension.
- Garbarino, J., Governale, A., Henry, P., and Nesi, D. (2015). Children and terrorism. *Social Policy Report*, 29(2), 3-30. Online at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED569207.pdf>
- Masten, A.S., and Narayan, A.J. (2012). Child development in the context of disaster, war, and terrorism: Pathways of risk and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63, 227-257. Online at: www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-psych-120710-100356
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2015). *Helping children cope with terrorism – Tips for families and educators*. Bethesda, Md.: National Association of School Psychologists. Online at: www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/war-and-terrorism/helping-children-cope-with-terrorism
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2014). *Helping youth after community trauma: Tips for educators*. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Online at: www.nctsn.org/resources/helping-youth-after-community-trauma-tips-educators
- New York University Child Study Center. (2006). *Caring for kids after trauma, disaster and death: A guide for parents and professionals* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Child Study Center.

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ndsu.edu/extension

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost, Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 100, 701-231-7708, ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 1M-5-06; 750-4-13; 500-8-19; 500-2-25