



## ***Talking to our children about Violence and Terrorism: Living in Anxious times***

### ***Living in Anxious Times: Introductory Remarks***

Since the September 11 attack America has changed. Children and adults alike live with a new level of anxiety. Terrorism is a new threat that we are all doing our best to understand and adjust to. In addition, too many children continue to live with the threat of physical as well as social-emotional violence on a daily basis! Unfortunately, even when terrorism and physical violence is not a significant aspect of a child's life, bullying and victimization often are. This guide explores some of the common questions that children as well as adults have about how to respond. We hope that this helps you to listen, understand and respond to the children you care about.

### ***Why should I talk about this with my children?***

Children are exposed to violence, locally, nationally and internationally too much of the time! Most children are aware that their world has changed since September 11, 2001. They are aware that the world is not always safe. Children want us to reassure them that they – and their loved ones -- will be safe and secure.

As parents and caregivers, it is our responsibility to help children understand the phenomenon of violence, be it at a local/neighborhood level, an anniversary of September 11 and/or the war in Iraq. We must do our best to provide children with the help and support they might need. Parents are the central sources of safety and security for their children. Children of different ages observe what happens, understand it and react to it differently. As adults we must remember that we cannot assume that our children's worries are the same as our own. *It is important to try to understand children's perspective from their own point of view and not impose our own ideas or beliefs upon them.* At the same time, of course, we need to give them age appropriate limits, guidelines and reassurance. It is so important that we listen, listen and listen to our children. When we as adults are able to listen to our children's feelings and concerns, we can help them learn, understand and feel safer and secure in their world.

If you feel too anxious or overwhelmed to talk to your children about these issues, ask a relative or a friend to talk to your children and find someone you can talk to as well. As we describe in more detail below, these are anxious times for adults as well as our children. It is essential that we also listen to ourselves and consider how we can and need to manage our own concerns.

### ***When using these guidelines, it is important to keep the following things in mind:***

- Reactions will vary from child to child depending upon a variety of factors including their personality, age, developmental level and personal history.
- When thinking about how to talk to your children, take your cues from them in terms of what they need and what they are thinking and feeling.
- Start by checking in with your children and listening to their concerns.
- There is no one "best way" to react to or acknowledge violence.
- Talking about children's concerns can be a means to help children better understand the world and can further the process of healing and learning.
- Not all children will appear to be affected by violent events – be it at a local level or the war in Iraq. For some children, especially younger children, it may not be appropriate to "force the issue" if they are not aware of events or especially concerned.
- Children who were directly impacted by violent events (e.g. a neighborhood incident, the war in Iraq or September 11 or who have had a history of loss or trauma) are most vulnerable.
- Helping children to deal with a difficult event is hard work—parents should seek help and support when needed.



### ***What reactions should we expect to see in our children as they are exposed to violence?***

The current war in Iraq is a media event. American advertising, movies and too often political campaigns over expose children to violence. As Michael Morris reported in the documentary “If it bleeds, it leads.”

There is a tremendous range of normal reactions that children will have when exposed to violence. The more directly affected children have been (e.g. seeing a violent incident in their home or neighborhood, seeing repeated images of the World Trade Towers falling or the war in Iraq) the more they will tend to react to new exposure to violence. For example, many children and adults may still be having significant reactions to the September 11 attacks that happened more than year ago. As the second and then third anniversary approaches, it is not unusual for the anniversary of an event to bring up intense memories or concerns. Children may re-experience some of the feelings associated with the scary events that occurred on 9/11/01. Children and families who have experienced a direct loss or who were directly impacted by the events of 9/11, the war in Iraq or a neighborhood incident are especially vulnerable to experiencing ongoing difficulties.

Children are likely to react in a variety of ways. Some children may even seem to be unconcerned or frustrated by the amount of coverage a given event receives. Some children may appear “back to normal” but may still be feeling sad, scared, or anxious or angry. Other ways that children -- and adults as well -- can experience reactions to violence or the anxious threat of violence are through changes in mood, irritability, changes in academic performance, appetite or behavioral problems. It is important to remember that any of these reactions can be appropriate and that during this difficult time we must be tolerant of the variety of ways in which children and adults remember and experience these troubling events. However, if these difficulties become pronounced or of concern to you as a parent or caregiver, you should seek help from your pediatrician or other trusted healthcare professional.

### ***What questions are children likely to have?***

#### ***❖ Are we safe and will it happen again?***

Whenever children as well as adults are exposed – directly or indirectly – to violence, we naturally ask, “will it happen again?” The government and the media’s discussions of “Code Orange” naturally make us anxious. In fact, to some extent this is the intent of “code orange.”

Since the terrorist acts of September 11, there has been a wide range of efforts made to ensure our Nations safety and to combat terrorism. Our country’s military, law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency service personnel, educators, parents and government leaders are focused on keeping our children and our country safe. Our government has worked hard to help the world become a more peaceful place. Children also need to be reassured that our government is taking a range of precautions to prevent any further incidents of terrorism. But when children ask general questions about safety, often they are really looking for reassurance that their immediate world of family, friends, other important figures in their lives are now safe.

The amount of details that children will find useful will depend on their age. The older the child is, the more details will likely be discussed. Provide the basic information in simple and direct terms and then ask for questions. Take your cues from your child in determining how much information to provide. Provide reassurance whenever possible and remind them that they are not at great risk of danger.

It is impossible for us, as adults, to predict if these events will happen again. It is important to reassure our children that their parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults --including the president and our national leaders— are doing everything possible to keep them safe. However, it is also important,



especially with older children, to engage them in honest discussions about safety and security in our world. It is sometimes a difficult role as parents and/or educators to be straightforward and honest with our children while at the same time providing them with reassurance. But it is important to remember that our children look to us for a sense of safety, security and stability in their world.

❖ ***Who do we blame?***

It is understandable that people would be angry with the individuals who commit acts of violence and/or terrorism. Sometimes people are angry with those people that are easier to find and blame – such as people who look like they might belong to the group that might have been responsible. Children should be told that although it is normal to feel angry, at this time it is important to remember that these acts of violence and/or terrorism were committed by a small number of people who do not represent a particular race or ethnic group. The United States is a country that prides itself in having members of many different races and ethnic backgrounds. This is a time to join together as a country, not to search to blame members of our country. It is important to let children know that our government – at local, state and national levels -- is taking action to defend our country against those who threaten us.

❖ ***As a parent, how do I answer these questions? I don't want to make things worse, so should I say nothing instead?***

Often what children need most is someone whom they trust who will listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns, thoughts and fantasies, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support. While we would all want to keep our children from ever having to hear about something like this, reality does not allow this. Silence won't protect them from what happened, only prevent them from understanding and coping with it. Remember that listening, answering, and reassuring should be at the level of the child's understanding.

❖ ***What if this discussion upsets them?***

Many children, especially older children, will want to talk about the events surrounding violence. However, when you talk with your children about these issues it is possible that they may become upset. In some cases they may even cry, get anxious or cranky, or show you in some other way that they are upset. Remember, it is really the events that are upsetting them, not talking to you. Talking is an important means of sharing your feelings and learning how to cope and adjust with loss. It is okay if your children get upset when talking about scary or disturbing things, but as a parent you can reassure them and help them to feel safe and secure. Make sure your child realizes it is okay to show you when they are upset. Otherwise, they may try to hide their feelings and will then be left to deal with them alone.

❖ ***What if they don't ask any questions – should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?***

When upsetting things happen, it is a good idea to be ready to talk with your children. At first, older children may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. In most cases it is not a good idea to force them to talk with you, but instead keep the door open for them to come back and discuss it later. Keep an invitation open, but wait until they accept. Often children find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling instead of talking about themselves. Think about how your children dealt with prior crises in the past and consider trying now what helped them when they were upset or worried before.



❖ ***What if my child doesn't seem upset by events around the anniversary of a violent experience?***

Whether we are thinking about the death of a neighbor or the September 11 attack, people naturally have anniversary reactions: the anniversary is a reminder of what happened. Many children may appear disinterested in the anniversary and even irritated by the continued attention focused on these events. The size and scope of a child's world is smaller than that of an adult -- the crisis may simply not have affected them directly; they may be far more concerned about their own life. Young children may not understand, or even know, much about what has happened or what it means. Other children may be concerned, but afraid to ask questions or to share their feelings. Children may visit their concerns briefly, but then turn to play or involve themselves in schoolwork before they allow themselves to feel overwhelmed. They may express their feelings indirectly through play or through changes in their behavior. For all of these reasons, it is easy for adults to underestimate children's reactions or expect reactions from children when none are warranted. However, it is important not to assume that they are upset, but not talking about. It might be easier to ask them what other kids in school are saying about the anniversary as a way of giving them the opportunity to talk.

❖ ***How do I know if my child needs more help than I can provide? Where would I go for such help?***

If your children continue to seem to be particularly or unusually upset for several days -- especially if they are upset or worried about many things, or they are having (more) trouble in school, home or with their friends -- then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. You may wish to speak with your children's teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, mental health counselor or member of the clergy for advice. Please remember that you shouldn't wait until you think they NEED counseling -- you should take advantage of counseling and support whenever you think it will be helpful.

❖ ***What is helpful about listening and talking with a child about their reactions?***

Being exposed to violence is an emotionally "wounding" experience. Just as when a child falls down and scrapes her or his knee, we need to clean the wound. Otherwise it can become infected. Talking about wounding experiences is akin to "cleaning the wound." It "stings" or hurts. But, it allows a healing process to unfold. For example, children often have unrealistic worries and fantasies. When they give voice to these ideas (e.g. "It was my fault that....") we can help them to understand the reality of the situation. It is normal to be upset, to be confused, and to be frightened when violence colors our life. If these feelings and related thoughts are not expressed in some way, they can go "underground" and complicate healthy development and children's capacity to learn.

❖ ***Will talking about violence scare children even more?***

No. We should listen to children and respond in a caring, connected and supportive ways. It is often upsetting to talk about these moments and our worries. But, it is even more frightening to believe that we can't talk about these concerns.

❖ ***When is it helpful to let children know what we feel?***

Usually, it is always most helpful to first listen, listen and listen. When we give voice to our concerns, we can sometimes (inadvertently) burden children with our concerns. This can raise new worries on the child's part. Children need to feel that someone is in control and knows what to do. After we have listened to their concerns and drawn them out about any and all related questions and concerns that they have, it is sometimes appropriate to communicate our concerns. This will tend to be most often the case with older children. We may very well share concerns.



And, we can let children know that we will be together during these difficult times. Children need to know that they are ‘connected’ with adults who care.

❖ ***Where can I learn more about talking with children about violence and promoting their capacity to live in these anxious times?***

- ◆ The *Center for Social and Emotional Education*’s website [www.csee.net](http://www.csee.net) includes resources for parents and school personnel: interviews with experts, book chapters and a series of resources that support our ability to help children develop the social-emotional competencies that help us manage and even learn from adversity as well as to feel safe and cared for. In addition, the following web sites include helpful guidelines:
- ◆ *American Psychological Association*: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)
- ◆ *National Center for Children Exposed to Violence*: [www.nccev.org](http://www.nccev.org)
- ◆ *Educators for Social Responsibility*: [www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org)
- ◆ *National Association of School Psychologists*: [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

**CREDITS**

These guidelines build on work collaboratively developed by *The Center for Social and Emotional Education* and the *National Center for Children Exposed to Violence* or 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238).