

How to Talk to Children About Terrorism

It's hard to explain to our children something we can hardly grasp ourselves. The following guidance comes from a range of child care experts who have offered advice on what you need to know about talking to children about terrorism.

Yet another horrific terrorist attack has taken place—this time in Manchester, England, where children were among the victims of a suicide bombing that took place at an Ariana Grande concert. When such senseless, devastating events make headlines, it's natural for children to hear about it and ask questions like, "Why do people want to hurt us?" How to answer this heart-breaking question is something no parent is naturally prepared to do.

We're all looking for ways to explain something that's impossible to explain—because *we* don't understand it. Talking about terrorism is different from other scary news, because we're accustomed to natural disasters, but we're unprepared for random and atrocious displays of violence.

Still, while we may wish we didn't have to talk about terrorist acts with our innocent children, it's a necessity. Due to the world we live in and the nonstop news cycle, parents must develop the tools to discuss the topic with their children. These tips can help:

Find out what they know.

We'd all like our children to remain blissfully unaware of terrorism, but don't expect that you can shield them from it. If they don't hear it on television, other children are going to be talking about it. They can see that their parents maybe are more concerned than usual, paying more attention to the TV. They may overhear adult conversations. Even if they don't know what it is, they still know something's happening. Having information can actually help take away the confusion, and help children feel better.

Let the information they have launch the conversation, and then let children steer the discussion with their questions and concerns. "Say, 'You may have heard something really sad happened in Manchester, and I wanted to know what you had heard about that,'" If you're not sure they've heard anything—and

don't want to open a can of worms—just ask about their day, or if they heard anything interesting, and see if they bring it up.

Talk about it more than once.

Be sure your children know they can ask you about difficult topics, because being able to talk about something makes it less scary—keep the lines of communication open. Even if you have spoken with your children, it's important to keep talking to them because they are at risk of getting a lot of misinformation from their peers.

Keep it simple.

Limit TV so you know your children are only getting age-appropriate information. We know that violence can have lasting effects on children even if they are only learning about it through the media. Take care with the images that children see and hear about.

Answer any questions your children have in language they can understand. A 4-year-old would say, 'Something bad happened,' and there are 'bad people,' because developmentally, a child that age would be thinking bad people, good people, and there's nothing in between. You can say, 'Yes, there were some bad people, and they hurt some people because they were very angry, and we know that it's never okay to hurt ourselves or to hurt somebody else because we're feeling angry.' Keep it very simple.

Bring it to their level.

Then, relate what happened to experiences children can understand. For example, 'You know when you get in a fight with your friend because you want the toy, and she wants the toy at the same time? And only one of you can have it? People fight and they get upset when they can't have what they want, or a loved one is hurt, and these are all different reasons why people get in big fights.'"

Avoid getting into conversations about religion, politics, or other subjects, which really aren't relevant unless you're talking to an older child or teen. Children are very egocentric, and they want to know that they're okay, and the people around them are going to be okay. Minimize it. Something sad happened. People were

hurt and killed, but people are looking after them and we are all very safe. That's the main question you want to be addressing.

Pay attention to the types of questions your child is asking, too. If a child is asking, "Why do people want to hurt us?" or "Why do the terrorists hate us?" the key is to notice that the child is making this personal. "You should answer, 'They don't hate us, they don't even know us,'" Otherwise you have children who have absorbed the idea that they personally are hated by scary, very violent people who might crawl in their window at night.

Encourage them to express how they feel.

Listen to their worries and help them name their feelings. What we're trying to do is help children cope and understand what's going on, but we're also teaching them coping strategies that can last a lifetime. Young children need to have words for what they're feeling. How do you express feelings? What do you do when you're angry? What do you do if you're sad? How do you respect people's differences?

Reassure them.

While you can acknowledge that what happened is scary, you want to reassure your children with your words and behaviour. First, put it in perspective. For example say to children, 'You know, the reason it's on the news so much is because it's such an unusual occurrence'.

Next, emphasize that while there are some bad people in the world, there are many more good people. Sometimes children will ask questions like, 'Am I going to be okay?' or 'Why do these bad people do such terrible things? Will life ever be the same again? And could this happen here?'" We don't always have the answers to those questions, and you can say that, but you can also identify all the people who are working very hard to keep our country safe. Make a list with your child of all the good people you know to show her what a great support system she has.

Model good coping skills.

You also want to show them that while terrorist attacks are scary, *you* are okay. Naturally, parents are going to be rattled and frightened, but our children watch us very, very carefully to determine how they should feel about things. If our

tone of voice conveys confidence in the people who are ensuring our safety and in stepping up the efforts to prevent this from happening again, then our children are reassured.

If you're not feeling confident, though, don't fake it. Being disingenuous can actually make kids more unsettled, because they can sense when words don't line up with feelings. Instead, say that while you're frightened and sad, you're also comforted by knowing how many people are working hard to keep us safe. How we manage our own worries is going to be the biggest thing we can do so if parents need help dealing with it, they should be getting it, but not in the presence of their kids.

Consistency is also important, so keep your routines the same and keep life feeling normal. Kids are very rooted in the now.

Empower them.

Terrorist attacks are scary because they make us feel out of control, so help your children focus on areas where they do have power over their safety. Talking to little children about strategies they use for keeping themselves safe, like wearing a seatbelt in the car, wearing a helmet when riding a bike, and practicing fire drills. Simple little things like that all help children think there are things I can do to keep myself safe.

For older kids, talk about ways they can get involved, like writing notes of support to children in the country that was attacked or holding a bake sale to raise money for an aid organization.