

# Talking About the Terrorist Attacks

The terrorist attacks have taken an immeasurable toll on the American people—children included. By now, kids all over the country have seen the horrific images of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and have serious concerns and questions about the attack and their own personal safety.

As a teacher or caregiver, you have a special role in the lives of children. What can you say to help children cope with such an enormous loss? Although how you handle the tragedy in your classroom will depend on the age and maturity of your students, here are some general strategies to keep in mind:

**Be honest.** As teachers know, children are often more aware than adults might realize. If you minimize what happened or the emotions associated with it, they'll likely worry more than if told the truth.

**Give the facts.** Avoid speculation and embellishment, and you'll help stop rumors from spreading and soothe ungrounded fears. Offer your explanations in language your students can understand, and remember that children at various stages of development may need different information.

- Very young children around preschool age are not fully able to tell fantasy from reality. Their fear of a tragic event may be the same as their fear of monsters under the bed. Children at this age take their cues from parents and other adults; they need brief explanations and many reassurances.
- School age children understand reality but lack perspective. Their fear is real and often focuses on the fact that this could happen to them. Their safety and security and that of their loved ones is of primary concern to them.
- Adolescents are likely to understand the tragedy, and they are also more aware of the media's role. They need facts, discussion, and perhaps to feel as if they are helping in some way.

**Make your students feel safe.** Your students' security has been threatened, particularly because the attacks happened in more than one place. Discuss in concrete terms what procedures are in place in your school for dealing with emergencies. Tell your students that the

president and other experts—police, firefighters, rescue workers, doctors, and nurses—are in control of the situation.

**Be a good listener.** Communication is the key for getting through a tragedy of this magnitude. Allow students to discuss the situation and comfort each other. Have question-and-answer sessions and assure them that all their emotional responses will be accepted.

**Share *your* feelings.** According to the National Association of School Psychologists, during a tragedy, children look to adults for their reaction. It will help your students to know that they are not alone in their grief. Knowing that you have similar feelings will help legitimize their own.

**Remember that there are many expressions of grief.** Not all children will cry, and not all will be fearful. Some will experience a delayed reaction to the tragedy, and others might have no reaction at all. Look for absenteeism if you suspect a child is withdrawing into isolation, and keep an eye out for any other changes in behavior. Having experienced a personal tragedy or other trauma (such as being bullied or abused) can worsen the reaction in some kids.

**Take care of yourself.** You may notice symptoms of an acute reaction to stress in yourself such as anxiousness, sleeplessness, or changes in appetite. The media can make it worse, so limit your TV consumption if the images are too hard for you to watch.

**Talk with other teachers.** You are a valuable resource to each other. Share your time and resources, particularly phone numbers for mental health intervention and suicide prevention. And don't rely completely on the administration to relay information to your students: you are the one in contact with the kids on a daily basis, so let the healing begin in your classroom.

**Watch for warning signs in your students.** After a traumatic event, most people will have an emotional reaction that might include feelings of shock, anxiety, helplessness, sleeplessness, depression. But if you notice these symptoms interfering with your students' lives, let parents and the school counselor in on your concerns. Posttraumatic stress disorder can result if a person experiences continued stress. Even children who have been to the Pentagon or the World Trade Center might experience a profound sense of loss, so try to identify students who are at risk and check with your district about appropriate referrals.

It's normal for some children to regress in behavior or to act out in aggression after a traumatic event—some might even mimic the retaliatory actions they see in Hollywood movies. Although you should reassure students that anger is a normal response, they do need to understand that expressing that anger in the form of violence at school is never acceptable. Help your students find ways to express anger appropriately.

**Consider talking about stereotypes and prejudice.** Reinforce the idea that it's unacceptable to stereotype nations and peoples associated with the terrorist attack, both abroad or in the United States.

**Communicate with parents.** If you haven't already, consider sending notes home to parents about how your class or school is dealing with the aftermath of the attack, what safety measures are in place, and what signs to look for in their children if they suspect depression or a posttraumatic stress reaction. Many schools, especially those in and around the areas attacked, will have counselors, crisis specialists, and psychologists on hand. Urge parents to make use of these resources. And if you notice a child having a particularly difficult time, let the child's parent and a school counselor know.

### **Teachable Moments**

This national disaster is inexpressibly tragic. But even in the face of such disaster, there are many teachable moments. Help your children sort out their feelings through art, writing, role-playing, and physical outlets. Select articles from the newspaper or magazines to read and discuss together. It may also help if they're allowed to "get involved" in some way. Have your students make signs of support or get-well cards for the victims, or ask them to write letters to the families who were involved in the tragedy or to the local newspapers. They may also write thank-you notes to hospitals, police departments, and fire companies. As a class, you may make a donation of money or supplies to the Red Cross or other relief organization.

According to the National Education Association, the routine of school can be comforting to children in times like these, and so can the support of teachers, administrators, and other students. But be flexible when your students need it most—for example, it probably wouldn't be a good idea to give a big test this week just because you had one planned. Don't worry if you find your students' emotions and your own make it difficult to return to teaching right away. The NEA suggests setting a goal about when you plan to return to the lesson plans, and trying to reach that goal day by day.

Kids and families all over the country are likely to have known someone involved in this tragedy. If you have a student whose behavior concerns you, bring it to the attention of your school counselor or principal so that psychological help can be given.

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