

Guidelines for School Staff and Parents on Helping Children Deal with Fears and Anxiety about War and Terrorism

Threats or realities about war and terrorism can be a frightening experience for all people. Adults need to help children feel safe at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place. Parents and teachers in particular must help youngsters understand current events factually, how events do or do not impact on their lives, and how to handle their emotional reactions. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- live in proximity to past traumatic events
- have suffered a personal loss or had first hand exposure to terrorism, violence or war
- are of different cultural heritage and may feel threatened by intolerance of racism or different religions
- have parents or relatives in military service
- have parents involved in emergency response or public safety
- suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, depression or have other mental health needs

All children, however, are likely to be affected in some way by war or terrorism. For many, the guidance of caring adults will make the difference between being overwhelmed and developing life-long emotional and psychological coping skills. Teachers and carers can help restore children's sense of security by modelling calm and in-control behaviour. It is crucial also to provide opportunity for children to discuss their concerns and to help them separate real from imagined fears. It is also important to limit exposure to media coverage of violence for young children.

What Parents and Teachers Can Do

Remain calm and reassuring:

- Children will take their cues from you, especially young children. Acknowledge that the threats and uncertainty are unnerving but the likelihood is that you and your children or students will be okay. There is difference between the *possibility* of danger and the *probability* of it affecting them personally.

Acknowledge children's feelings:

- Try to recognize the feelings underlying children's actions and put them into words. Say something like, "I can see that you are feeling really scared about this..."
- Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage any questions they may have regarding this event. Listen and empathize. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that others are feeling the same way and that their reactions are normal and expected.

Help children to feel personally safe:

- Make time for class discussion. Always be honest with children and be prepared to answer questions factually. Share your fears and concerns. Put these fears in perspective as to what is realistic. Reassure them that responsible adults will look after them.
- Let children who are worried about a parent or relative involved in military action know that the chance of returning from a war is very high. Advances in medicine and technology have greatly reduced potential losses from military actions.
- Try to maintain normal routines and schedules to provide a sense of stability and security.
- Stop children from stereotyping people from specific cultures or countries. Children can easily generalize negative statements. Proactively teaching tolerance and a multicultural curriculum in school lessons during this time can help prevent harassment of students and improve their sense of safety.

Help children maintain a sense of control by taking some action:

- Finding ways to address the intolerance that leads to conflict and aggression at school can be one way to help children regain a sense of control.
- Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need

Pay special attention to children who may feel isolated:

- Children who are new in school due to relocation may benefit from a special network of “friends” to help orient the student to new school routines and encourage participation in school activities.
- Children from minority ethnic communities may feel vulnerable and require additional positive regard
- Children in care may need extra attention to their feelings of separation and fear of loss.

Coordinate between school and home:

- Teachers should let parents know if their child is exhibiting stress in school. Provide parents with helpful suggestions or information on community resources. Maintain general academic and behavioural expectations, but be realistic about an individual child’s coping skills.
- Teachers should share with parents information about social studies/history lessons and other relevant discussions that take place in the classroom. This will help parents understand what their children are learning and can foster thoughtful discussion at home.

- Create a sense of collective security between home and school. This will help children feel safe and provide a sense of protection.

Expect and respond to changes in behaviour:

- All children will likely display some signs of stress. Children may grasp at any control that they have, including refusing to cooperate. Some immature, aggressive, oppositional behaviours are normal reactions to the uncertainty of this situation.
- It is important to maintain consistent expectations for behaviour. Be sure children understand that the same rules apply.
- Some children may have difficulty at bedtime. Parents need to maintain a regular bedtime routine. Be flexible about nightlights, siblings sharing a room, sleeping with special toys, and sitting with your child as they fall asleep. Doing so typically does not cause life-long habits.
- Children may play “war,” pretend to blow things up, or include images of violence in artwork and writing. This may be upsetting to adults under current circumstances, but it is a normal way for children to express their awareness of events around them. Gently redirect children away from violent play or efforts to “replay” the terrorist attacks, but don’t be overly disapproving unless the play is genuinely aggressive. Talk with children about their art or written images and how they feel. Share your reactions. Help them to consider the consequences of war or terrorist acts—what happens if a building blows up or a bomb explodes? For children who seek pretend play as an outlet, encourage role playing of the doctors, firemen, policemen, etc. who have helped to save lives. If a child seems obsessed with violent thoughts and images or show extreme reactions (aggression, withdrawal, sleeping problems, etc.), talk to your school educational psychologist regarding interventions and the possible need for a referral to a mental health agency.

Keep adult issues from overwhelming children:

- Don’t let your children focus too much of their time and energy on a crisis. If children are choosing to watch the news for hours each evening, find other activities for them. You may also need to watch the news less intensely and spend more time in alternative family activities. Try to ensure as far as possible that access to media information is age appropriate
- Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. This, too, will help your children and students.

Resources

There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with the stress of war, terrorism and other crises. More specific individualised or group interventions can be discussed with The Educational Psychology Service who are available to offer additional guidance for parents, teachers and pupils in this area. School staff might find this document useful in any discussion with parents or carers with whom they are sharing concerns.

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