

NEWSLETTER

WebParentTip, SPECIAL EDITION for 9-22-01

Many parents have asked me, "What do I say to my kids?" "What do I say when they ask me 'Is World War III starting?'" I have over a million words for parents on my computer--my book, my newspaper columns, and all my website material. But I have no words now when parents ask me how to explain the horror to their children.

Of course children are frightened when they see buildings collapsing and people screaming as they run through the rubble in the streets. We adults are frightened too. September 11, 2001 was the end of the sense of security we have felt, insulated (we thought) by two vast oceans and bordered by two friendly countries whose populace share our values.

In addition to fear our children are angry. "Are they going to catch the bad people, Mommy, and hurt them too?" was the question asked by a child in our family after her mother explained that some bad people had done this.

How best do deal with these two strong feelings in your children: FEAR and ANGER?

- o BE HONEST. Do not try to conceal the truth, lie, gloss over the facts, or pretend nothing happened.
- o EXPRESS YOUR OWN FEELINGS. "What a terrible thing to hurt innocent people!" In order for children to learn how to deal with strong feelings they need to watch how grown-ups do it. Do not give children the message that emotions are best concealed or ignored.
- o ALWAYS EXPLAIN THAT YOU WILL KEEP YOUR CHILD SAFE. It's important to say that what happened was done by terrible people who will be caught and punished, and that MOST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD ARE GOOD.

The bright child may ponder, "But, Dad, the people in New York wanted to be safe but they died anyway." Tell your child that's why everybody feels so awful. But everybody, including the President, is going to work very hard to make sure that such things don't happen in the future. The terrorists will be found and punished. Then repeat that you will do everything in your power to keep your child safe always.

- o ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED. Ask questions that require a thinking answer like, "How do you suppose that person feels?" "What do you suppose the rescuers think when they go into that

building?" Ask young children to draw pictures or act out the rescue or hospital scene with dolls. Older children? Suggest they write a poem or story about what happened.

- o EMPOWER YOUR CHILD. Suggest things the child can do to help like send cards, collect money from all the cousins to give to the Red Cross, write letters to the rescue teams thanking them. Older children might do a project on terrorism. Empowerment comes from getting involved and doing something.

- o Be sure to GIVE PLENTY OF HUGS AND CUDDLES. When we are grieving we need human contact. Hugs are a palpable demonstration of your love and your children need to know they are loved.

- o Perhaps the most important thing you can do is TURN OFF THE TV. Don't bombard your child--or yourself--with repeated horrors.

- o LET YOUR CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR ANGER. Many in the media today are advising parents to tell their children, "Don't get angry." "Be tolerant." I certainly do not believe in stereotyping a group of people because of the actions of a few. Nor should we rush to judgement.

But, it's not wise for parents to deny their children's feelings. That's akin to saying, "Oh no you don't hate your new baby brother, you love him!" When we deny strong feelings in our children we may frighten them even more. These children know how they feel and need validation from their parents. "We understand how angry you feel. We're angry too. Let's sit down and talk about what should be done." Have a dialogue about the things we cannot and should not do--as individuals and governments--to solve the problem of terrorism. Ask your children what we can do to bring those responsible to justice but not cause an escalation of hatred and terrorism. If they suggest draconian solutions talk about whether this could make things worse.

- o Get back to your normal household ROUTINES as soon as possible.

- o Be prepared for a long AFTERMATH. Children grieve and process their fears in different ways. I was told of two little boys, both age three, who built twin towers with blocks. One took a toy airplane and repeatedly crashed it into the towers causing them to fall. The other steered the airplane toward the towers and repeatedly veered away at the last minute so the towers remained standing. Both boys are worried about what happened. Each is using play to deal with feelings. Let your children play in their own ways. If they want to talk about their play listen; if they just want to play that's OK too.

Older children may say things that seem strange to you. They may seem cynical (“Maybe we deserved it.”) or callous (“I’m tired of all the news, I want to watch my programs”). The wise parent listens and quietly says, “I understand how you feel.” or says something neutral like, “Tell me more about how you feel.”

Two points about the aftermath: 1) Nothing your child may say or play is wrong or cause for alarm. It is your child’s unique way of dealing with the fear and anger. 2) This was an unprecedented catastrophe to watch or contemplate. It will take a long time for all of us including children to process their feelings. Don’t be surprised if children stop talking about it but start again, weeks or months from now.