

Talking to kids about tragedy

How to respond to fears and questions

Edited by Dr. Andy Bacon, (president, Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Edmonton) from an Internet article

As much as we try to protect our children from frightening news reports, there is likely no child who escaped the horror of seeing or hearing about Tuesday morning's terrorist attacks in the United States. As you struggle to handle your own feelings about this unthinkable tragedy, consider these tips for talking with your children. How you respond to their fears, feelings, and questions is the key to helping them feel safe again.

Turn off the TV. Don't let your own desire to keep up with the news get in the way of your children's well-being. Even if your children are very young, the continual commentary, frightening speculation, and repeated replaying of the disasters on TV will only fuel their fears and insecurities, not to mention your own.

Share Scripture and prayer. Allow the Good Shepherd to speak to the hearts of his little sheep. Use perhaps the following selections or others you are comfortable with

Psalm 23

Psalm 121

Psalm 46

Take time to talk about the themes of God protection for His children, and His great love for them in Jesus Christ our Saviour. Continue to pray for those families who have lost loved ones asking God to give His gracious comfort and support as well as praying for those who are working with the emergency.

Try to control your response — it matters more than anything. If you're overcome by fear and sadness, your kids, even if they're very young, will pick up on that and it will make them feel even more scared. It's okay to share some of your feelings. You can let them know that you, too, feel sad for the children and families that have been affected. But also share any tips you have for dealing with your feelings: "I just keep reminding myself that my friends and family are safe and that there are lots of police, firemen, and others who are busy trying to protect us."

This will be easier to do if you have someone, such as a friend or pastor, who can listen to your fears so you don't pass them along in the discussion with your child.

Reassure, reassure, reassure. If you're faced with a question you just can't answer, remember that the most important thing you can do for your children is reassure them that you'll do everything you can to keep them and the rest of your family (including yourself) safe. Tell them that God is watching over them and that He sends his guardian angels to be with them. Tell them it's the job of the grown-ups around them to protect him. Assure them that you, their teachers or caregivers, and the other adults around them care about them and will do everything possible to keep them safe. Tell your kids that a lot of people are thinking about safety and working hard to prevent more violence.

Be available; let your children ask questions. It may be tempting to say, "Everything is fine. We're far away from the explosions and nothing will happen to us." But that can sound dismissive to your child if you aren't also addressing his specific concerns. The best thing you

can do is listen to his questions and continually reassure him. If you're at work during the day, give your child the number and let him call you whenever he's worried about something. Ask your children what their biggest fears are, and encourage them to talk about them. If they're having trouble articulating them, consider these common fears after a disaster or tragedy, and try to address them even if your children don't mention them specifically:
The event will happen again. Someone they care about will be injured or killed. They will be separated from the family. They will be left alone.
Keep in mind, too, that it's also common for children to express concern for people they don't know. Be supportive of these concerns.

Play with children who can't talk yet. If you have a child who is too young to ask detailed questions or express his feelings, that doesn't mean he isn't fearful or worried by the atmosphere around him. To help a young child express his feelings get on the floor and start playing — puppet shows, drawing pictures, and reading books can help small children get those emotions out. If your child draws pictures and then wants to tear them up, that's okay. It's a perfectly natural, physical way to deal with frustration and anxiety.
You might also consider setting up a play situation where your child can scare you. "If you then act really scared but in a lighthearted way, he'll be able to laugh about seeing someone bigger in a vulnerable position," family therapist Alison Ehara-Brown says. "This will help him regain a sense of power and allow him to work out his fears."

Get back to your family routine as soon as possible. Children of all ages thrive on routine. It doesn't make sense to pretend that life is normal if your family has been deeply affected by large events, but the groove of their daily lives — dinner, bath, reading time — can be tremendously reassuring to children. If your children are home from school for one or more days, try to keep them on a weekend schedule of meals, playtime, etc.

Consider how you can help. Children can regain their sense of power and security if they feel they can help in some way. Right now, the best thing you can do is follow instructions. Continue to offer prayers for those who are sad and need God's comfort.
In the coming days we'll learn more about what's needed. It may be food or clothing donations, blood, or even financial support. Asking your children to gather some old clothes, toys, or food and packaging it up together will give them a sense of helping others that will go a long way toward making them feel better.