

How to talk to children about conflict or terrorism

A Summary of Things to Do

Many of us prefer to avoid talking to children about unpleasant events, especially if we are not sure how we feel ourselves. But if children and adolescents are to learn effective ways to cope with distress, adults must offer opportunities to talk with them.

Here are some ideas for adults to use when talking with children about tragic events.

- Assume children may have heard about events. Disasters and tragedies are media saturated, with children exposed to them almost as soon as they happen.
- Be accessible and approachable. Listen to what children have to say about the event. This gives you the chance to clear up misunderstandings and identify the support that they need. Be ready to listen!
- Encourage creative ways to express feelings, such as art and music. If they want to draw pictures and destroy them, that's okay. If they want to send them, that's okay too. Be flexible.
- Help young children feel safe. Reassure them and be realistic. You can try to protect them but you can't always keep bad things from happening to children. Identify the difference between danger as a possibility and danger as a probability.
- Look for feelings beyond fear and anxiety.

Encourage the development of caring and empathy by pointing it out when you see it occurring.

- Help children find some course of action. Children may want to write a letter and adolescents may want to become involved in an organisation committed to prevention of such events. Children have great ideas!
- Take action yourself. Get involved in working to make a difference. Children sense this and feel more hopeful when you do.

Giving Bad News

Occasionally there are circumstances in which the school needs to inform a child of bad news. This information is best given as soon as possible in a clear, direct and unambiguous way. Two adults should be with the child, one in a support role and the other to give the bad news. Once the information is given and the child's pain has been acknowledged, that adult should withdraw and leave the child with the supporting adult. The supporting adult should be known to the child and should remain with the child until a parent or relative or carer arrives.

Offer sympathy and support as the child expresses their feelings. At the same time accept that the child is likely to be in shock and may not behave as you would expect. If you need additional help or support with

managing the situation, please contact the number on this leaflet. Some events are media saturated and families may engage in watching a lot of television. This is likely to increase the child's sensitivity to any developing events, creating the feeling that it is happening to them. Be aware that such children will have difficulties concentrating and may be experiencing poor sleep or nightmares. Calm school and class management and normal routines will help.

Mobile phones & social media

Be aware that children or adults may get information in a range of ways, which is distressing. Make sure member of staff are on the lookout for children who are withdrawn or distressed – and that you have the pastoral arrangements to check that they are alright.

Web:

www.edukent.co.uk/our_services/service/educational_psychology/

Email:

Educational.psychology@kent.gov.uk

Phone:

03000 410250

This publication is available in alternative formats and can be explained in a range of languages. Please call 03000 41 41 41 for details.

A Haven of Normality: School

Advice for adults in schools

Introduction

This leaflet helps adults in school think about the needs of vulnerable children. It suggests a number of approaches to planning a response.

Who might be vulnerable?

Children who:

- Have suffered a personal loss from, or first hand exposure to, terrorism, violence or military actions. This includes refugees and asylum seekers
- Live close to the scene of past traumatic events or potential target areas
- Have family members currently living, or deployed, in areas of conflict
- Have parents who served in the armed forces in past military conflicts
- Have parents of different ethnic, religious or cultural groups who feel threatened by intolerance or racism
- Have existing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties
- Are young or developmentally young
- Are in public care, including unaccompanied minors

Make your school a 'Haven of Normality'

Children find the normal routines of school reassuring. Be prepared for some children's behaviour to be out of character for a while.

Remain calm and reassuring as children, especially young children, will take their cues from you. Acknowledge that the media coverage is unnerving but the likelihood is that you and your children/students will be okay.

Try to keep to the standards that you would normally expect. Keeping to a regular routine can be reassuring and promotes physical health. Encourage children to keep up with schoolwork and extracurricular activities but make allowances if they seem to become overwhelmed.

School Response Planning

Develop an inclusion plan for any children joining your school as a result of displacements or conflict overseas. Such children are often repatriated without the opportunity to say goodbye to friends. They have to deal with joining a new school as well as very altered family circumstances or bereavement.

Regularly update your school emergency plan and telephone tree. Make sure that the identified people know their roles in case of an incident affecting your school. You will probably have someone in your school who has received training on managing sad events and dealing with grief and loss. You may need to also discuss how you would give bad news if you were asked to do this.

Acknowledge your own feelings and take time to talk over any issues that are worrying you with a colleague or friend. Sharing feelings with others makes us feel more connected and secure.

Emphasise people's resilience by focusing on children's achievements and competencies in terms of managing their daily life and other difficult times. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset.

Be optimistic. People who coped best after 11 September were comfortable expressing strong emotions, surrounded by caring family and friends, kept a positive view of the future, and utilised problem-solving skills.

Do something positive with your children/students to help others in need. Making a positive contribution to your community helps people feel more in control and builds a stronger sense of connection.

Taunts, Bullying and Racial Incidents

Make sure your policy is up to date and includes effective ways of dealing with bullying and racial incidents. Young and developmentally young children do not understand the finality of death and this can lead to seemingly heartless comments.

This behaviour is best handled by collecting a small group together which includes some of the perpetrators and explaining to them that such comments are very unkind and cannot be tolerated. Without blaming any individuals you ask them for some ideas as to how they could help to stop this happening.

Accept the suggestions from the group and ask them to keep you informed as to how things improve. Meet the group regularly to monitor the situation and check that you are getting the message across.

This message of zero tolerance could be reinforced at assemblies. Getting those who are responsible for taunts involved in the solution has been found to be far more effective than sanctions. Punishments usually serve to foster greater resentment.

Monitor all instances of racial harassment and use the racial incident reporting procedure.