

## How To Talk with Children about Tragic World Events

The attacks in France in 2016 and in the UK in 2017 are examples of tragic and traumatic events which most people find impossible to understand. It is the children who have the least capacity to understand such atrocities. When a catastrophic event occurs somewhere in the world, our instinct as parents is to protect our children, however if they have heard even a small part of a conversation or a news report avoiding a discussion does not help to shield them.

Children need different information to feel safe and they look for different levels of detail depending on age and understanding. It is relatively easy to ensure young children do not become aware of the tragic events, however older kids and adolescents will know something big has happened whether you are the one to tell them or not.

You know your kids better than anyone, so it's important to base your conversation on your children's questions and what you know about your child and their capacity to understand, what they know already and what it means to them. It's important to show your empathy and compassion as this will nurture theirs.

We all relate events to our own circumstances and begin to consider the possibilities of that event occurring near us, and children do this even more so. Find out how your child is feeling and reframe what they are saying to them, to show you are listening and understanding. Saying things like, "Oh, don't worry," or "Don't be silly - nothing like that will happen here," is not helpful and may make them worry more. It is helpful to say, "I can see you're worried, you're feeling scared. It's a frightening thing to happen." (This is emotion coaching and is a skill we have written about in many previous articles.)

Describing the differences between the circumstances where the tragedy has happened and the child's circumstances can help ease fears. *'This has happened in a different place to where we live. Nothing like this has ever happened here.'* If the trauma has happened near to where we live, positive comments are, *'When something like this happens, people work really hard to make sure that something like this never happens again. The people who do this are really great at what they do. They learn a lot about how it happened and the type of people who did it and they use that information to keep everyone safe.'*

It is vital to respond according to the age and understanding of your child/ren.

For **young ones** it is best to shield them as much as you can. Answer questions in as much detail as you need to help them feel safe.

**Children 5 - 11 years** are attempting to find where/how they fit in the world, understanding how the events will affect them and whether it could happen to them are likely to be the questions most on their mind. Giving them details they ask for and not more than that takes skill in holding back and saying less, rather than more. They need to know that you fully understand what has happened and that you aren't just saying whatever you need to say to make them feel better.

**12 - 14 year olds** are beginning to think about things in creative, abstract ways so it can be difficult to anticipate what they're thinking or feeling. Whatever they're thinking is important and valid – let them know that. Let them know that this sort of thing is confusing for everyone and there's absolutely nothing they can say or think that would be silly. Clear up any misunderstandings or misperceptions, and give them a balanced view of what has happened. *"It's tragic what has happened, and I understand why you feel the way you do. The world is still a good place and you still have as much reason to feel safe now as you did before this happened."* Given that the emotional centre of adolescents' brains are developing at a heightened rate, it might be that they show a greater intensity of fear, anger or sadness. They might also show no emotion at all to the news. Open the way for them to talk, but don't push them if they don't want to, *'Did you hear about what happened? Is there anything you were wondering about or would like to talk about?'* Let them know that it doesn't matter if there isn't, but that you're there if they need to chat about it.

Friendship groups are highly important for the **over 14s** and they will most likely be hearing a lot of information through friends and social media, so it's important to make sure the information they have is accurate. Ask them if they've heard about what happened and what they know about it to give you a chance to provide accurate information. Don't be surprised if the over 14s are finding stability and comfort with their friends. Let them know that you wish you had the answers and that you wish you could say nothing like this will happen again but that you can't say that – nobody can. We belong to a humanity that is largely good and kind and stands solid against those who act against it. This is what our children need to know. When things happen out of our control, it can feel disempowering for all of us – the questions, the helplessness, the lack of control over what happened. Give them back their power by letting them know that they have a vital role in building a world that is safe and good to be in. Empower them by letting them know that their voice, their thoughts, and the way they are in the world all matter. They need to know that it's because of them and people like them that the spirit of love, kindness and compassion will always be stronger than anything that tries to weaken it. People who cause traumatic events are acting against humanity, they're not a part of it and when they strike, humanity always proves to be kinder, more generous, and stronger. Remind them.

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