

## Talking About Tragic Situations

Yet again we have been confronted with disturbing and distressing content on our TV screens. There are often distressing and horrifying scenes on our TV screens, of families desperately fleeing war and destruction, of starving, orphaned children and obliterated family homes and townships. Terrorist attacks are not new news, and we are sure there is not a parent amongst us who was not appalled by the recent chilling events in Manchester.

How can we talk to our children about the scary things that happen in the world and still make them feel safe? It is more and more difficult to protect them from hearing about the horrifying things that occur.

Dr Paul Coleman, author of "How to say it to your child when bad things happen" suggests that, unless your child brings it up first, we should avoid attempting to explain bad things to children before the age of 7. They simply do not have the capacity to comprehend news events in context. We should be the buffer. Turn it off or do not put the news on in their presence.

Of course, there will be exceptions. Children may actually witness an horrific event or they may see or hear something on the news, and ask you about it. We all need to feel safe. Little people particularly need to feel safe. They need to know that what they have witnessed is not going to happen to them and that you are there and doing everything in your power to make sure that it won't. Even if you believe that is not entirely true, a child's sense of safety is built on believing that it is.

When your child asks about a particular event, however, do not automatically assume they are traumatised. They may simply be curious. Ask them what they have heard and how they are feeling. If they are not worried, don't worry them. If they are frightened, ask them what they are frightened about. Correct any misconceptions and reassure them. Never dismiss your child's feelings. Validate them and then reassure them again that they are safe.

If you are asked awkward questions, answer them simply and with minimal, truthful, information. It may be enough. If they want to know more, they will ask. It is not necessary to give gory, bloody details, or to show images that evoke terror, fear or pain. Remember too that young people don't necessarily realise that same event is repeated over and over on the news. They may well envisage the same thing is occurring again and again.

For older children, we should not shy away from talking about events that have occurred. It is an opportunity to dispense any irrational fears or misconceptions (often gleaned through social networks) and to reassure your children of your love, your presence and your protection. Talking about world events with them can give you some good insight into their

developing moral, political and social conscience. It is also a good opportunity for you to share your insights with them.

Still, there is no need to bombard them with information, or with your own fear. Our task as parents is to validate their feelings and to help them to manage the emotions that arise from the event, best done by talking things through. This may be difficult for them (and for you). Consider your own reactions. It is not helpful if they have to manage your emotions as well. If you stay calm and rational, the chances are that they will too. Ask them what they want to know and help them to find out. Do not underestimate the power of having a parent who will listen, validate and reassure, or the power of talking about what they could do to help. Check out some websites that help kids do good things.

Clinical psychologist and trauma expert, Dr Emma Citron urges parents to avoid nasty details and suggests a few helpful phrases such as, "This is an extremely rare occurrence," or "Security will be tightened up so much more after this." To the questions, "Could this happen here?" or "Could this happen again?" play down the likelihood. "It could, yes, but it is very rare and unlikely."

Our children need to feel safe and secure and it is up to us to provide this safe environment and feeling. This is best helped by maintaining regular routine. Business as usual: netball, guides, dancing class, school, story before bed.

Sometimes a tragic event occurs at home and it is impossible to shield your child from it. Basically, the same rules apply. Keep information factual, truthful and minimal. Answer questions but do not bombard with too much information. Children will ask if they want to know more. Then reassure. "You are safe." "We are safe now." "I'm not going anywhere." How can you tell if your child has been adversely affected to exposure to such news stories?

Children are remarkably resilient and most children will cope and adjust with your love, presence and reassurance, but yes, it is possible they may be traumatised, and you do need to monitor them. You know your children best, and you will know if their behaviour changes. Watch out for changes such as fearful, clingy behaviour, bedwetting, an inability to concentrate, a preoccupation with the event, somatic pains eg headache or stomach ache, irritability or bad behaviour. If you become concerned take them to your family GP.

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The following websites were useful in the preparation of this article and make good further reading.

<http://www.parenting.com/article/5-tips-on-talking-to-kids-about-scary-news>

<http://www.bbc.com/news/education-40011787>

<https://www.common sense media.org/blog/explaining-the-news-to-our-kids>

