

TERROR:

How to Talk to Children

By: Magne Raundalen and Atle Dyregrov
Center for Crisis Psychology, Bergen, Norway

We know that children from the age of 5 to 6 start to take in much of special radio and TV-broadcasts that lead to reactions in and discussions among adults. Many adults, being a child when president Kennedy was shot, can tell of nightmares and anxiety following the event because adults in their families reacted strongly, without children getting adequate explanations and therefore had little understanding of what happened with age adequate words and images.

Following the shock, children as well as adults want to know who did it and why. These questions are intrusive as they are related to children's fear about this happening to them or their loved ones. When we do not know who or why, we often fail to talk to children about the horrible event. There are however, important information we can convey as adults, that has to be adjusted to a child's age and level of understanding, things we can say regardless of who is responsible for the gruesome acts.

In the following we provide some examples on how one can talk to five to six-year-old children. It is, however, important that parents see this as suggestions and find words that suit their own children. It is possible to say that there are people that are angry at America, that want to make America and American people sad and angry. It is terribly wrong what they have done, but their thinking is faulty as are their deeds. They can be angry at America because America does not help them or because they think they are suffering because of America. In some places

America is believed to be a big, dangerous enemy that they want to punish. It is very wrong to kill innocent Americans. We call what they do terrorism, and almost all countries in the world is against this.

After what happened it is natural that both adults and children become more afraid, afraid that more terrorism can happen and that it will happen where you live. The police, the FBI, president and many others are working to find out who did this and to make sure that nothing more can happen. All over the USA adults make sure that it can be safe and that nothing more can happen. All over the world people are now working to make sure that this cannot happen again.

For older children from age 9 and onwards, we can explain that most adults including the journalists think that this has to do with politics. This is more difficult because one has to enter the politics in a way. The point is that children should be able without being led into limitless thoughts of revenge.

One can explain that some people in poor countries or in countries where there is war want to take revenge on the mighty and rich USA that will not support them or that they think carry out politics that make them poor or weak. It can also be because they mean that USA have sided with their enemies. This is what we call international politics that means politics among several nations. Such acts that we have seen are called terrorism. Most countries will condemn terrorism because it kills innocent people like people in airplanes or people who have just arrived at work when their building is hit

Terrorism is the most serious of all crimes because it kills innocent people because those who kill want power and influence. No one can

defend terrorism. However, there are some people in countries or among groups that themselves feel they have experienced much injustice, loss of people, and that feel that no one listens to them that are willing to go to such extremes. It is sometimes said that terrorism is the language of the powerless. Even though we all believe that it is wrong, it is not enough that rich countries condemn terrorism. It has to go hand in hand with working for justice, human rights and help to people in need, to prevent them from becoming so powerless that they start thinking of terrorist acts to be heard.

When USA and the American people have experienced terrorist acts it is important that those who are responsible be caught and punished. At the same time it is important that this happens in a way that does not lead to the death of many other innocent people. That would also be a form of terrorism.

As parents there are some important guidelines that can help your child:

- Set aside a talking hour over the first day to hear the thoughts and reactions of your child. Make sure that you understand what your child has understood in order to correct misunderstandings and lower fantasies that he/she may harbor.
- Explain in a concrete, direct way what has happened and answer truthfully any questions. Assure them that you will be there and that nothing will happen to you.
- Do not hesitate to embark on difficult subjects if the children bring them forward e.g. seduced suicide bombers and martyrs who are promised eternal glory in Paradise. Prepare yourself for properly.
- Be aware that you and your child live in "different worlds" if you have reached the stage of anger and they live in a climate of

grief and sorrow because they think of all the children who have lost mothers and fathers. If they want, help them write sympathy letters to local newspapers or to persons.

- Do not let your child watch the strong pictures on television for hours at end. Use time with your child away from the television.
- Reestablish routines in the child's daily rhythm or schedule, especially in relation to bedtime.
- Introduce a family ritual, i.e. burning a candle in the first days to acknowledge your own and your child's reactions.
- Let the child make a drawing or letter or in other way express their sympathy for those who have lost loved ones. Older children may be helped by writing about what happened and their deepest thoughts and feelings in relation to this.
- Expect an increased need for more physical contact, an increase in reactions that reflect fear that something will happen to you or other loved ones, and other reactions such as sadness, more "childish" behavior, anger and so forth.

In addition to contacting the authors Magne Raundalen or Atle Dyregrov:

The International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.

410-750-9600

<http://www.icisf.org>

icisf@icisf.org