

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TERRORISM

The recent terrorist attacks in London following on from the recent events in Manchester, where children and young people were among the victims, has spread shockwaves across the globe. With media coverage reaching saturation levels it's difficult to shield children from these events. The task for parents is to reassure children, while trying to explain events that for most of us are inexplicable.

While most parents quite naturally don't want to discuss terrorism with children, it's not a topic that you should avoid, particularly if your children ask pertinent questions. Here are some ideas that will help:

## 1. Discuss age-appropriately

The Australian Psychological Society recommends, "It's best to shield pre-schoolers completely from frightening or traumatic world events." This means protecting young children from media coverage and being mindful of adult conversations around young children. However even young children overhear conversations and know what is happening, so be prepared to discuss events in ways that they understand.

Primary school-aged children have more exposure through the media and the schoolyard. However children can easily misinterpret events so be prepared to clarify misconceptions and open the way for conversations.

Older children are usually very aware of media coverage, and have an understanding of the ramifications both personally and politically. Opening the way for more in-depth conversations as well as processing any feelings that arise is important for this age group.

## 2. Manage yourself first

Children of all ages take their cues about unusual events from their parents. Events such as terrorism may leave you feeling unsettled and outraged but you need to think carefully about the emotions you communicate to children. First and foremost they need to feel safe, so it's best to keep extreme emotions in check in front of children. Share how you feel with your children but make sure you are in control of your emotions. Air strong feelings of anger or disgust with trusted adults if you need to vent or explore your own reactions.

## 3. Find out what they know

Children often confuse time and place so they can easily think that an event that occurred on the other side of the world will directly impact on them. Young children, in particular, usually personalise situations. They may, for example, think that an older relative is in danger because he or she is a regular concert-goer.

## 4. Keep conversations simple

Let children steer the conversation with their questions and worries. Answer children's questions matter-of-factly and simply, while bringing issues down to their level if necessary by talking about why people get into fights, and pinpointing appropriate and inappropriate reactions. With older children and teens you may be able to hold discussions around politics and religion but do so without stereotyping, or providing narrow analyses of events.

## 5. Listen to their worries

Encourage your children to talk about their [feelings](#) as well as their thoughts about the events. If possible, help them give their feelings a name. Assist them to understand that it's normal to feel scared, sad and angry when events like these occur. Some children may want to spend more time around you, which is a natural reaction to distressing events that are outside their control.

## 6. Monitor media exposure

Limit children's exposure to television as constant viewing of images of tragedy and terror can reinforce that the world is a dangerous place. Be mindful that constant repetition can de-sensitise some children impacting on their ability to feel empathy. If news is being seen, join children and young people to watch those media stories of terrorism so you can provide adult perspective and clarity to what they are seeing.

## 7. Help kids feel empowered

Keep reminding children and young people that their world is basically a safe place. Focus on simple ways that young children stay safe such as wearing a seatbelt, using a helmet while riding a bike and strapping on safety gear when they skateboard. Older children may want to fundraise for a charity organisation so they learn that they can make a positive difference. You may also hold discussions with teenagers about current safety measures such as airport security and possible increases in security at future entertainment and sporting events.

## 8. Remind kids that people are good

Perhaps the most insidious aspect about terrorism for those that are not directly affected by it is that it can lead to mistrust of others and a cynicism toward different religious or political groups. It's easy to lose sight of the basic goodness in all of us. It may be useful then to highlight stories of heroism and goodness that come out of terrorism attacks. With young children, make a list of all the people such as medics, police and fire personnel that keep us safe. With older children share stories of heroism, community and the help that always comes after distressing events.

Conversations about disastrous events such as terrorism provide opportunities for parents to help children manage difficult emotions; and help them make sense of complex events while broadening their understanding of the world.