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The Orlando Nightclub Shooting: How To Talk To Your Child About Terrorism

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The spate of recent terrorist attacks can cause anxiety and fear for children, particularly younger ones. The horrific terror attack at the Orlando Pulse Nightclub, the worst shooting in American history, only heightens these concerns. Parents may worry about how to have a conversation with their child about these devastating events.

I recommend that you frame it in such a way that you're not producing unnecessary anxiety for your child, but providing them with enough detail to satisfy their curiosity or concerns. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, I was a provider of crisis counseling services to children, teachers and parents under a Project Liberty grant to my agency, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPPCC).

Here are my suggestions.

Monitor the TV and the Internet Coverage that Your Children View. Terrorist acts are intended to spread fear and anxiety. Extensive news coverage can worsen this problem for both children and adults. Be an active participant in monitoring the type of information they receive. I recommend that children under the age of five or six not be exposed to the media images, as developmentally, they are not be ready to comprehend this type of violence. Parents should diligently monitor the TV, computer, newspapers, etc. to make sure that children are not repeatedly exposed to the graphic, violent images and photos. You can't "unsee" something. The American Psychological Association has a good tip sheet regarding "How much news coverage is okay for children"

Research following the terrorist attacks in Oklahoma City and on 9/11 showed that children who continuously watched the coverage had more symptoms related to trauma. My guess is that the media will be playing the upsetting, dramatic news clips of what happened in the last attack many times over in the next few days.

Let them know you are there to listen to their questions and concerns. Some children will talk and some won't. Both of these reactions are okay. What children need is reassurance that you are available to answer their questions when they are ready to discuss what happened in the most recent terrorist attack.

When they do raise it, you can ask "What do you want to know about what happened?" Or, "Tell me what you've heard about what happened?" Keep your conversation age-appropriate. Here is a good resource that discusses age-appropriate conversation about terrorism.

Find out what frightens them and address it. Most children will want to know the bottom line - Will I be okay, will you be okay and is this going to happen here? Their emotions will vary based on their age, personality, religious background and their connection to the attacks. Also, keep in mind that trauma is cumulative in nature. So, if your child has experienced other traumas in their life, these terrorist attacks may put them at risk for higher distress. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has a good tip sheet that describes children's varied responses to terrorism.

Stick to the facts. Children may have heard many different and possibly conflicting stories that could cause confusion for them. Be concrete. For example if you are addressing the Orlando Pulse shooting, you can say "There was a man who the police believe did not like gay people. He wanted to hurt them, so he attacked these innocent people, to try to scare all the people in Orlando, the United States, and around the world. Many people died. It is very sad for all of us."

Your child may then raise issues about death and what happens afterwards. Depending on your beliefs, you should answer these questions as best you can.

There are many heroes helping now and during the days beyond. Talk about the brave efforts of the police, firemen, other first responders and medical providers helping in the aftermath. It's also good to let them know how important is for a community to band together to support each other during difficult times. Emphasize kindness and hope.

Here are a few scenarios to think about.

If your child becomes upset after reading the newspaper or watching TV, encourage them to discuss their feelings. Normalize and validate them. Don't try to "correct" them. There is no right or wrong feelings and each child's will be different.

Children could be very moody, depressed, angry, anxious, possibly even cry. Acknowledge that these attacks make many people very sad. It's completely understandable. Praise your child for being able to express their feelings. Then talk about what might make them feel better, for younger children, diverting them with play is helpful. For older children, it may be playing sports, watching a comedy or uplifting movie.

If your child asks "What is a terrorist?" you can tell them that a terrorist is someone who tries to hurt and scare people. They are trying to make people afraid. Terror is another word for being very scared. I would then add that there are not many terrorists in the world, but there are many good people in the world working hard to keep them safe.

If your child asks "Why did they do that?" you can say, "The man who did this was a terrorist; he was very angry and wanted to hurt the people in the nightclub. He did this to scare people and to cause much harm and damage to the people who were in the nightclub."

I suggest that you stay away from going into detail about ISIS/Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Your child needs reassurance that he/she is safe and not in danger.

If your child asks "Will it happen here?" you can tell them that "from the President of the U.S. to our local police and firemen, many steps have been taken over the past 14 years since 9/11 to keep us safe, and that our officials are working on it every day.

Create (or go over) your Family Emergency Plan. You may also want to reassure your child by creating an emergency plan. Calmly explain to your child you are ready for an emergency and have a plan that will keep them safe. The Homeland Security website provides a template for parents to use to create a plan with their children.

The components that you should cover are:

- Contact person(s) in case of an emergency. What will happen if they are in school or you are in work or separated from them. Who is the "go to" at that time?
- The meeting location if family members are separated.

- How to call 911 if an emergency happens in the home.
- Emergency supplies that you keep at home, medicine, money and a cell phone, canned food, water, flashlight, battery operated radio, first aid kit, etc.

Review the plan with your child when it is NOT an emergency so they can digest it and ask questions that may come up before an emergency arises.

Keep tabs on yourself. You probably have strong feelings about what happened in the recent terrorist attack. Reactions such as intrusive thoughts, being hyper-vigilant, or just being sad are common. It's okay to share how you are feeling with your children. You will serve as a role model for them and reassure them that these hard conversations are possible.

For more information about keeping your child safe visit The NYSPCC's website www.nyspcc.org