

## Guidelines For Talking About Violence

As we pray for Paris, please use the guidelines from Dr Jessie Osburn, our resident child psychology expert for Doctors For Kids to help you talk about these issues sensitively and mindfully with children. Unfortunately, exposure to violence has become common, be it terrorism or domestic gun violence..What we say can change their thought processes tremendously, these guidelines will help you bring balance to their emotions.

With Warm Regards,

Dr Mavani.

### Talking About Violence

Dr. Jessica Osburn, PhD

Whenever a tragedy occurs such as the recent terrorist attacks in France, Beirut and Baghdad, children, like the rest of us, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react and make sense of the events. Many parents wonder if they should protect and hide the realities of violence from their children, while others believe in full disclosure, no matter how difficult. You may be somewhere in the middle. Your children are likely exposed to coverage of these events either via the media or peers despite efforts to shield them. It is difficult to know how much information is appropriate to share or how to talk about such difficult matters with children. A number of mental health experts provide guidance on how to address these issues. At the end of this document, you will find links to a number of professional organizations that have developed guidance on this matter. Below is a summary of these guidelines that may help when talking to children about human violence and terrorism:

1. **Stay Calm:** Children sense and adopt the emotions you bring to the conversation. If you are calm, it will help your child to feel more secure and calm. If you are feeling too anxious, uncomfortable or overwhelmed to have a discussion, wait until a later time or ask another trusted adult for support.
2. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
  - *Early elementary school* children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change.
  - *Upper elementary and early middle school* children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy.
  - *Upper Middle School and High School* children will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in society. It will be important to know their sources of information and to clarify facts as needed.
  - **For all children-** encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!
3. **Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. You can assure them that terrorist attacks are a rarity. Discuss that most people and places are safe every day. Ask your child what will make them feel safer. Offering these opportunities for discussion teaches positive coping skills, problem solving and offers your child a sense of control.
4. **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that the government emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors and the military are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.

5. **Let children know that it is OK to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are OK when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is OK, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately. Take the time to understand your child's unique perspective, even if their fears seem irrational to you. The more your child feels heard and supported, the more likely they are to gain understanding of their world and a stronger sense of safety and security.
6. **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief. It can help to verbalize and label your own feelings to help them learn the words and label their own emotions.
7. **Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others.
8. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
9. **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
10. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health professionals can help. It is OK to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition and exercise.

Below are some specific resources that may be helpful:

1. The American Academy of Pediatrics has tips for talking to children of all ages and also includes specific guidance for talking with children with developmental disabilities:
  - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx>
2. PBS offers information to help parents understand how a child views the news depending on their age (see "age by age insights" link) and also includes information about how to start the conversation if your child is clearly in distress but does not have the words to express themselves (see "discussion starters" link):
  - <http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/>
3. The American Psychological Association offers general guidelines for parents as well as signs to look for regarding your child's potential distress: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/aftermath.aspx>