

Balancing Act Newsletter

Feeling Safe in an Uncertain World

This issue of *Balancing Act* was in the final editing stages when a co-worker came in my office exclaiming the horror of the airplane hitting the World Trade Center in New York. As the hours passed and radio reports announced further disaster and terrorism, the adults around me became more anxious. Exits were closed in our courthouse and a law enforcement officer checked everyone coming in with a metal detector.

“What was happening to our safe, small town world?” I thought as I passed the metal detectors and then heard the radio reports unfolded multiple terrorist attacks. I knew the adults around me were concerned about our safety issues. I quickly pulled out the Disaster Manual and knew that part of this *Balancing Act* issue must be changed to reflect information that would help you and your children cope with the horror that was happening in our country.

With Whitman Air Force Base in our midst and many families connected with the military, their lives are being changed minute by minute. Parents are being deployed, not knowing the future actions of our country. How do we make sense of this as a country, as adults, and as children? We must regain a sense of trust and security. How do we do that?

Help Your Child Cope with the National Disaster: A disaster is frightening to everyone. Several factors play an important part in a child's reaction to the event. Children are affected by the amount of direct exposure they have had to the disaster. If a friend or family member is deployed, or has been killed or seriously injured there is a greater chance that your child will experience difficulties. You can help your children grieve by patiently listening and being able to tolerate feelings. This is a major factor in a child's perception of adults' reactions to the disaster. Children are very aware of adults' worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive during the period of a disaster. Acknowledging your concerns to the children is important, as is your ability to cope with stress.

Not talking with your children about the terrorist attacks does not protect your children.

In a calm, supportive manner talk honestly about the facts of the disaster. Falsely minimizing the disaster will not end the children's concerns.

Encourage your children to share their feelings and discuss their experiences.

Consider Your Child's Age: Another factor that affects your child's response is his/her developmental age. Talking about the disaster together, using words your child can understand is important, as is being sensitive to their different responses. Continue reading for specifics.

Children's Reaction to Trauma

Birth to 2 years

Without the ability to speak, children cannot describe the event or their feelings. Babies may be more irritable, cry more often and need to be held and cuddled frequently. They will respond to the caring that is given to them by an adult.

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Preschool and Kindergarten

When the safety of their world is threatened, they feel insecure and fearful. Children this age cannot understand the concept of permanent loss. They believe that consequences are reversible. They will repeatedly recreate parts of the disaster in their play. These are all normal reactions. Abandonment is a major childhood fear, so children need frequent reassurance they will be cared for and will not be left behind.

Activities for home or school: play acting, physical contact, puppets, art, stories, large muscle movement (throwing balls, etc.).

School age (7 to 11 years)

Children at this age have the ability to understand the permanence of loss from a trauma. They can become preoccupied with details of it and want to talk about it continually. They may not be able to concentrate in school and their grades drop. Since their thinking is more mature, their understanding of the disaster is more complete. This can result in a wide range of reactions: guilt, feelings of failure, and anger.

School age children can also slip back into earlier behaviors. As in younger children, sleep problems can appear. Their anxiety and fear may be seen in an increased number of physical complaints.

Activities for home or school: play acting, puppets, drawing and painting, sharing their experiences in groups, reading, creative writing or discussion.

Pre-adolescence and adolescence (12 to 18 years)

In this age group, children have a great need to appear knowledgeable and experienced to the world, especially to their family and friends. When they live through a traumatic event they need to feel their anxieties and fears are shared by their peers and are appropriate. Their reactions are a mixture of earlier age group reactions and reactions that are more adult. Teenage years are a period of moving outward into the world. However, experiencing a trauma can create a feeling that the world is unsafe. Even teenagers may return to earlier ways of behaving. Overwhelmed by intense reactions, teens may be unable to discuss them with their family members.

Talking to Your Children about Terrorism

While children may not be directly affected by the tragic events surrounding the terrorist attack on America, they will have questions and concerns about what it means for their world. Though news reports were not intended to alarm children, it is impossible to protect or shield children from knowledge of an event of this size. They have heard or seen media reports and adults discussing the issue, and they can tell that the adults around them are concerned and upset. School evacuations and lockdowns will add to their level of concern and it is critical that the adults in their lives — parents, teachers, and guardians — help children deal with and process this event.

Young children. Preschool children will be very confused by these events. Many young children do not know how to tell if something happened to them or to other people. They will be very sensitive to what adults are feeling. Young children can be an important asset to adults at this time, too, however. Holding and hugging young children can be reassuring to both the adults and the children.

Elementary school children. Some school-age children will want to know explanations of the events and the factors involved. It is important to assess each child's level of understanding to see if he or she is capable of understanding the difference between the media reports and the entertainment shows they're used to watching. Help school-age children understand where the attacks occurred and where those cities are in relation to your location. They will benefit from expressing their ideas in various forms, such as art, letters, and music and with puppets. They also would benefit from taking some kind of action, such as writing letters, preparing a display for the community, or collecting items to help survivors.

Adolescents. Adolescents will want more details and will have more skills and coping strategies to deal with the event, but they still will not deal with it the same way that adults do. Because adolescents tend to look at the world in a black-and-white fashion, they may want to know who the bad guys are and who the good guys are. It would be helpful to guide them toward separating the evil of the event from the value of people.

Adolescents could easily take the emotions of the event as a call to paint entire groups as enemies or evil. They may be able to understand that the concerns of groups may be legitimate, but that using violence — whether it is a fist, a bomb, or an airplane — is never the best way to deal with frustration or anger.

Young Adults. While people in this age group often feel invulnerable, events this traumatic and close to home may shake their certainty. Young adults will be more knowledgeable than children about the nature of the attacks and the consequences, and their fears will be more realistic. Their methods of coping with those fears may not be. Young adults tend to focus on the cause and may want to take some kind of action, such as getting in a car and driving to a demonstration. Older adults will need to help them keep this in perspective and guide them to positive outlets such as giving blood, collecting money for victims, or attending a vigil or memorial service. They may also want to learn more about geopolitics and world history.

Time to Rediscover Your Priorities as Family Members

Day-to-day life has been shaken by a national disaster. And, most of us, if not affected individually by the disaster, think about what it could mean to have had a loved one on a plane or in and around the buildings. Our nation has suffered a huge loss and we are feeling insecure. However, our personal security is provided by family and our surroundings.

If any good can come from this organized terrorist attack, it is the process of us “looking at the big picture” and realizing the importance of family, children, and relationships. Renew your commitment to your family and rediscover your priorities in the aftermath of this national trauma.

Look at your life and determine if you are doing what you intend to do. Do you spend your time on the important things? What would you do differently?

Ask your family members how they feel about each other since this attack. Tell your family and show them that you love them.

Q&A...Q&A...Q&A...Q&A...Q&A

Q: What are some other resources I can get?

A: Call your Extension Center to get information about children and coping with stress. Or, the following Internet resources are useful: www.cyfernet.org/talkchild.html and www.PrepareRespondRecover.com/childrensneeds/ and www.redcross.org