Talking to Children about Violence Pt. 1

Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of crisis. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds, and in their hearts, and give them the best of our understanding and our guidance. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers ask most frequently about ways to have discussions about events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. This is Part 1 in a series of 3 HelpSheets.

Should Children Watch Coverage about Tragedies?

It depends on the age and maturity of the children. Parents may decide that some shows and topics are inappropriate. However, if children are going to watch programs about the event, we recommend that a parent or caregiver watch with them. Afterwards, talking together about reactions to the coverage and feelings about the event in general can help children make sense of a seemingly senseless tragedy.

How Can I Judge if a Child Is Ready to Talk about Difficult Events?

Most children from age four to five and above would appreciate talking with adults they trust. In the media there is daily discussion of difficult topics, and it is likely that children know about them. However, it is also quite likely that they have some confusion about the facts and the magnitude of the danger they personally face. They often have mistaken information, questions and some strong feelings. Often children are hesitant to share their questions and fears with adults. For this reason, we recommend that adults open the way for children to talk about their concerns.

How Do I Open Up the Subject with Children?

The key word here is "listen." Most experts agree that it is best not to open up a conversation with children by giving them a lecture, even an informal, introductory lecture, on the particular tragedy that is on the news. Don't burden children with information for which they may not be ready. The best approach is to listen carefully to children's spontaneous questions and comments, and then respond to them in an appropriate, supportive way. Let children's concerns, in their own words, guide the direction of the discussion.

Won't It Just Scare Children More if We Talk About It?

No, it won't, if you listen to children and respond in a supportive, sensitive way to what you hear. No matter how frightening some feelings are, it is far more frightening to think that no one is willing to talk about them. If we communicate by our silence that this or any other subject is too scary or upsetting to talk about, then the children, who depend on us, may experience the added fear that we are not able to take care of them. Young children especially need to feel secure in the knowledge that the adults in their lives can manage difficult topics and deep feelings.

What if Children Never Bring Up the Subject?

Some children may not bring things up because they are genuinely not concerned. Others may never bring up the subject, even if it is on their minds. Some are afraid of upsetting their parents or teachers by bringing it up, while others are too overwhelmed by their feelings to open up a discussion. As adults we can at least try to assess how children are feeling in order to decide whether a discussion is appropriate.

Children who are troubled but have difficulty talking about their concerns may need special attention. It can be helpful if we gently start the conversation ourselves. You might ask a simple opening question such as, "What have you heard about the event at

the World Trade Center?" or "How do you feel about what happened?" Later on, you might want to ask, "Do you ever think about what happened at the World Trade Center?" No matter what their response is, we need to listen, carefully and with care, to what our children have to say.

Is It Appropriate to Tell Children How I Feel?

There are several pitfalls in sharing feelings about particular tragedies outright with children. A serious one is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and fears for them, rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have. Another is that we might cut off the expression of what's on their minds and in their hearts as we get wrapped up in expressing what's on ours and miss hearing what children want to tell us. We might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying our need to give our children something rather than satisfying their need to be heard and understood. We wouldn't want to communicate the message that what they have to say is not important.

This is not to say, however, that we need to be passive; good listening is a very active process. After we've listened carefully, it then may be appropriate for us to respond in ways that provide assurance that the adults in their lives care and are trying to promote peace. We may also want to say that we share some of the same feelings and remind children that we'll be together during these difficult times.

How Can I Listen to Children in the Most Effective and Helpful Way?

As you listen to children, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from their point of view. Don't make judgments about what they say, no matter how silly or illogical it may sound to you at first. If you don't understand something, ask them to explain it. Show your respect for them and their ideas.

As parents, teachers and caregivers know, children are not always able to express what they mean or what they feel, and what they say doesn't always mean the same thing for them as it does for adults. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what's going on behind the initial words they utter. Comments such as, "That's interesting, can you tell me more about it?" or "What exactly do you mean by that?" are examples of ways to elicit more information from children without judging the rightness or wrongness of what they are saying.

If they seem to be struggling to make something clear, it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarize and focus their concerns. For example, you might say, "It sounds to me as if you have heard some horrible stories about the destruction of the World Trade Center and you want to know if they're true." Clarifying questions and statements help children sort out their ideas and feelings without interfering with their thinking process.

Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may not be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages, such as facial expressions, fidgeting,

gestures, posture, tone of voice or others, which indicate that strong emotions may be present.

It is reassuring to children to have adults acknowledge that their feelings are okay. A comment such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I think I know how you feel because I feel sad too," tells a child that the feelings are not only normal and understandable, but also that you have similar feelings and are still able to cope.

What If Children Don't Want to Talk about These Issues?

If you ask good opening questions and the child clearly isn't interested in talking about certain issues, then don't push. Again, it's important for us to communicate to children our respect for how they feel. This extends to respecting their right not to talk about something they don't feel ready to talk about. There are some children who simply aren't concerned about these things, and there's no reason to force them into this awareness.

Some children are reluctant to talk about tragedies because their feelings of fear and confusion overwhelm them or because they don't feel confident that adults will be able to hear their concerns and respond to them in a way that makes sense. Adolescents may be more reluctant to talk if they perceive their parents and/or teachers having different opinions. They may think that the adults in their lives will try to impose their beliefs on them. These young people need to know that the doors to communication are open when they are ready. One way to let them know this might be to say something like, "Are kids talking about what happened at the World Trade Center? I'd be really interested in hearing about what you and your friends think. Let me know if you want to talk."

Be aware of signals young children send out through their play, their drawing and writing, their spontaneous conversation and other ways they might communicate about their preoccupations. Young children often use their play to work out what they are hearing, and observing them as they play can give us important clues about their thoughts and feelings. Similarly, if you observe children drawing one violent scene after another, overhear conversations where they seem unnaturally concerned with violence and hopelessness or if your children seem in any way preoccupied with images of destruction, then it is appropriate for you to let them know that you have noticed this and that you wonder what it means. Use your own judgment, and listen attentively to what they have to say.

Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may not be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages, such as facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, posture, tone of voice or others, which indicate that strong emotions may be present.

Once you have really listened to what is on children's minds, you will be in a far better position to respond to them.

Contributed by Educators for Social Responsibility.

Talking to Children about Violence Pt. 2

Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of crisis. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds, and in their hearts, and give them the best of our understanding and our guidance. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers ask most frequently about ways to have discussions about events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. This is Part 2 in a series of 3 HelpSheets.

How Do I Deal with the Different Emotions that Children May Have about Tragic and Violent Issues?

It is natural and healthy for children to experience a wide range of emotions about any particular tragedy. Some children will be sad, anxious and even fearful for their own families' safety, others will be confused about how to make sense of the events and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions: fear, sorrow and worry, for example.

Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary-school children it will usually be issues

of separation and safety. For older elementary- and middle-school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation.

Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide reassurance, while in other areas our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure children, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much they care about others and the world around them. You can express that it is this caring that makes you proud and gives you strength and hope.

After I Have Listened to Children's Concerns, How Do I Respond?

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what's on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and help them distinguish fantasy from reality. When we have listened to what they think and feel, we can gently correct their misinformation by statements about what happened at the World Trade Center like, "By the way, it isn't true that this has happened in lots of other cities."

We can also answer children's direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. A child who asks, "How did the people in those buildings die?" or "What does hijacking mean?" deserves a factual answer. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent, such as underlying confusion or unexpressed anxiety, ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's questions.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not clear and straightforward. When children ask such questions as, "Why did people do this?" we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another. It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict.

Finally, we can give our children the opportunity to continue to explore their questions and to learn from this conflict. For instance, war play is a common phenomenon, particularly among young boys. Many use it to further explore and work out what they are hearing in regard to a violent situation. Some schools decide that war play is not appropriate on school grounds. If children we know are engaging in war play, we can utilize it as an opportunity to discuss what the games mean to them. If we are disturbed by it, we can share with them any concerns we have about that form of play.

For older children and adolescents, the World Trade Center crisis and others raise important issues about the ethics of violence, the ways conflicts are best resolved and insuring school security. For adolescents concerned about their own potential

involvement, it raises questions about their own options and choices. These are important issues for young people to talk about and think through with adults they trust.

At the same time, young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution and developing concrete skills in resolving conflict nonviolently. This is an opportunity for them to explore alternative means of resolving conflicts and ways that, even when a conflict becomes violent, people continue to work toward its resolution. In addition, it would be valuable for them to think about how they may pursue a constructive response that promotes peace and security in their schools and neighborhoods.

Should I Share My Beliefs with Children?

Because the opinions of adults in a child's life carry such weight (especially with younger children), we recommend that you focus on what the child is thinking and feeling. Stating an opinion, especially in the early stages of discussion, can block open communication by preventing children who hold different opinions from openly sharing and discussing them for fear of disapproval. Since most older children are aware of their parents' opinions anyway, it is perhaps more important to help children to think critically about many points of view and arrive at their own well thought-out conclusions.

However, it is important to communicate to children the value of hearing other points of view and respecting the people who hold them. Helping children understand that the issue of violence, for example, is a complex one allows them to feel that their opinions can make a contribution to our understanding of the issue. We recommend that you stress the importance of their examining a variety of points of view, as well as your own, and their learning to appreciate what each has to offer.

Difference of opinion can be very healthy, and something from which both adults and children can learn. Often, however, these differences degenerate into unproductive arguments where both the adult and child become entrenched even more in their positions. Constructive dialogue begins with a good deal of listening and a sincere effort to understand what the other person is saying and why he or she sees it as valid. It is important to avoid statements that categorically diminish the adolescent's opinions such as "When you grow up you'll understand that" or "You don't know what you're talking about." Instead, restate what the child has said to make sure you understand it. Listen carefully to the child's point of view, and ask questions to help him or her clarify it. Rather than countering those statements with which you disagree, ask questions that can help you understand the child's perspective.

There are respectful ways of disagreeing that you can model by stating your disagreements in the form of, "I experience things differently. I think that . . ." rather than telling the child that he or she is wrong. The goal, after all, is not to dictate opinions to children, but rather to help them make their own reasoned decisions about controversial issues. Finally, help your child understand that a person's opinions can change and that a decision reached today might be different tomorrow with the addition of new ideas and information.

How Can I Talk with Children if I Feel that My Own Grasp of the Facts and Issues is Inadequate?

Fortunately, we don't need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers. When older children ask for information we don't have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together." The process of figuring out where to get the information and going through the steps to obtain it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child's questions don't lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, "I don't know the answer to that, and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many good thinkers throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

How Can I Reassure and Comfort Children When I Honestly Don't Feel Hopeful Myself?

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group isn't practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

What Can I Say that Is Both Comforting and Reassuring?

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to hear calmly even their wildest concerns, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they do not have to be alone with their concerns.

You can also help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer and that the most effective antidote to anxiety, fear or powerlessness is action. Engage them in a conversation about the way in which their school is working to make it a more peaceful place and explore ways in which they might be an active part of the effort to create a peaceful community in their school, home and neighborhood.

Contributed by Educators for Social Responsibility.

Talking to Children about Violence Pt. 3

Growing up has never been easy. It's especially difficult for young people in times of crisis. We owe it to our children to listen to what is on their minds, and in their hearts, and give them the best of our understanding and our guidance. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers ask most frequently about ways to have discussions about events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. This is Part 3 in a series of 3 HelpSheets.

What If a Child is Fascinated By a Particular Tragic Event?

Due to the way these events are often portrayed in the media, it is natural for some children to be fascinated and, at times, excited by it. Preadolescent boys, especially, may have a fascination with some of the violence.

The reporting of violence sometimes takes on the tone of a sports event, and the language used in public discourse is often highly sanitized. As a result, some children may not be sensitive to the human suffering created by tragedies or the sadness and anxiety other children experience as a result. We need to help them see the other

dimensions of the issue, the ones that are not being reported.

There are age-appropriate ways to help children see the human and environmental consequences for all sides and the complexity of the issues involved.

What If Children Seem to Have Excessive Fears that Are Focused on the Tragedy?

Deep feelings of sadness, anxiety and confusion are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. Children with extreme concerns need to be listened to and understood the same way that children with normal concerns do. It may be more difficult for the adults closest to them to help them put their strong feelings into words. When children are troubled and their parents and teachers have difficulty helping them sort the trouble out, no matter what the issue, it may make sense to seek professional help. The problem may be as simple as untangling a particularly frightening bit of misinformation. If you have doubts about what a child's fears mean or how to help the child deal with them, we strongly encourage you to consult a counselor or other professional trained in this area.

How Can I Reassure Children If a Close Family Member or Friend Has Been Involved in the Tragedy?

You will want to watch for signs of significant increases in anxiety, distraction, fear or hopelessness and know where you can go for additional help in your area. Support groups are often formed for adults and children whose family members are involved in a crisis. Sometimes crisis is a trigger that reminds children of another crisis closer to home. Your school may need to form a group with children who are feeling stronger anxiety. Again, there are many professionals who are now available to help parents, teachers and children.

For many children, fear and anxiety will come and go, and for some, the anxiety and fear can be more constant. There are no easy ways to allay their fears. However, it is important to maintain the normal family routines and schedules as much as possible and to listen in supportive ways.

Validate children's feelings, and keep the channels of communication open. It will also help to provide reassurance through positive and hopeful comments such as, "There are a lot of people working to keep our schools and neighborhoods safe," or "People are working very hard to help all the families involved." Finally, when you are talking with children, especially young children, give them details about this friend or family member. Continue to make the person real and present for them by talking about him or her.

How Do I Deal with the Rage Some Young People Express Toward the Perpetrators of Violence?

Feeling angry is one very appropriate response when reacting to horrible atrocities, and it is important to acknowledge and recognize those feelings. Often, there are many other feelings hiding beneath the surface of what can be seen as an "anger iceberg," including fear, disgust, shock, sadness, helplessness, guilt and despair. It can be helpful to guess what students are feeling and what's important to them by asking, for example, "You're disgusted by what the attackers did, and you want to be able to do something for all those who were hurt?" Ask open-ended questions such as, "What do you think we could do to help prevent meanness and violence?"

How Can I Respond to the Revenge and Retaliation Fantasies that Some Young People Spell Out?

It is important to acknowledge that many people, including many adults, share those ideas. When adults, particularly adults in power, model these kinds of responses, we need to expect them from young people as well. Also, empathizing with the underlying feelings and helping students clarify what is important to them (that justice be done, for example) is helpful.

It is important to discuss how retaliation can escalate conflict rather than end it. We can help young people understand that when someone retaliates, the other person usually gets angrier and often chooses to strike back, escalating the situation even more. We can ask children how they usually respond when someone does something mean to them and how sometimes the meanness escalates.

We are all responsible for dealing with feelings of anger without harming others. If we want to oppose what the perpetrators did, one way to respond is to take steps to resolve conflicts peacefully rather than engage in acts of retaliation.

Remind children that many people around the world are working to see that justice is done. They are trying to figure out who helped commit this terrible crime and bring them before a court of law.

How Can I Intervene If I Hear My Child Make Prejudicial Comments?

Point out that rumors and misinformation often emerge during a crisis. Talking with children about the damage rumors cause in their own lives can help them understand the need to consider rumors with skepticism. It is also important to remind children that any accused suspects are innocent until proven guilty.

Parents and schools can help prevent the emergence of dehumanization, prejudice, stereotyping and victimization of any group. Children who share a culture with the people of the Middle East, for example, and children whose points of view diverge from that of the majority are at increased risk of becoming the targets of taunts, bullying and harassment. During the Gulf War, for example, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee documented that the rate of hate crimes against Arab-Americans skyrocketed.

In times of violent conflict, some people dehumanize the residents of countries whose governments are in conflict with their government. Sometimes, this dehumanization process extends to people who came from, or whose relatives emigrated from, that region. The internment of Japanese-Americans in the United States during World War II is one example of this phenomenon. If one student in a school steals a cookie, it would be a mistake to call everyone who goes to that school a thief. Similarly, we can't blame everyone who lives in a region for crimes allegedly committed by a few individuals.

Some media outlets, unfortunately, put forth images of whole groups of people that are distorted and demeaning. Because some people have little knowledge of Southwest Asia and Northern Africa other than stereotypes, they may inappropriately lump together the diverse cultures of the Middle East. Some might even advocate wholesale extermination of an entire people with comments such as, "We should blow the whole country off the map," or "Let's just wipe them all out."

We can help children avoid creating a one-dimensional image of Arabs, Jews, Afghanis, Americans or any people as simply "the enemy" by providing them with information. When we clearly communicate our rejection of ethnic slurs, taunts, jokes and physical abuse, we reinforce and model how to interrupt prejudice and promote respect for all.

Parents can help young people understand the potential for abuse and that harassment is not acceptable or legal. This may mean directly intervening to stop bullying or harassment. Even more important, parents can demonstrate and reinforce ways that people can listen to each other, learn from each other, support each other and respect each other's backgrounds and perspectives.

By helping young people understand the human and environmental consequences of wars and violent conflicts for all sides and the complexity of various issues, young people can become more sensitive to other people's feelings and points of view. We can help them recognize that people in and from the Middle East are human beings who experience joy and pain, have differences of opinion and deserve respect. Children can also begin to learn about the complexities of Arab and Jewish history and cultures, as well as about the many cultures of the Middle East in general.

Is It Appropriate to Encourage Young People to Act?

Situations, like the tragedy at the World Trade Center, can be distressing ones for young people. Sometimes simply knowing the facts can lead to anxiety, fear and powerlessness. One way to help young people overcome these feelings is to engage them in taking actions that make a difference. There are many actions young people can take, and possibly the most important one is to learn more about the issue. From there, however, it is important that young people learn to act to make a difference in their own worlds first. They can set up study groups with friends, organize a town meeting in their school or community to talk with others about their concerns or questions, put together a library shelf of books on the issue or express their points of view in letters to the editor. They can also join with adults or other young people who are participating in a wide variety of ways, such as fund raising for the school mediation program.

However, it is important that the children generate and implement the actions they choose to pursue. Although it may be helpful for children to know the range of things other children and adults are doing to make a difference, adults must remember not to enlist young people in their own causes. Because young people know about a particular issue, it does not mean that it is their sole responsibility to solve the problem. They need to see adults actively engaged in solutions as well.

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