



ASK DR. PEGGY

By Margaret (Peggy) DeLong, PsyD

Question:

My child has heard about and viewed images of terrorism in the world, and that extra security measures are now being taken in the United States. What kind of impact does this have on my child, how can I answer my child's questions, and how can I help my child feel safe?

My response:

- Consider your child's developmental level. Children have their own individual responses to images they may see on television or accounts of terrorism that they may hear based on their age and developmental level. Preschoolers may be the most disturbed by violent sights and sounds because they do not have the cognitive ability to fully distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy. In addition, they may become easily overwhelmed by exposure because they are not able to stop their distressing thoughts. Even older children may have difficulty understanding that a single event that is rebroadcast is not happening over and over. In addition, the immediacy of the terror alerts can make children of all ages feel as though the conflict is right at home. For all of these reasons, it would be wise to limit and closely monitor what your child is exposed to via the media.
- Consider your child's temperament. A sensitive child, or a child who is more prone to anxiety, is more prone to experience distress. These children may be more likely to experience nightmares, have difficulty concentrating, and have concerns about the safety of loved ones and themselves. It is important to limit exposure to the media. Also, monitor your child's distress. If your child demonstrates a change in eating and sleep habits, demonstrates excessive worries, suffers from nightmares, and/or loses interest in formerly enjoyable activities, your child may benefit from professional help.
- Reassure your child's sense of safety. Some experts believe that it is OK to make promises that you may not be able to keep, such as "Nothing is going to happen to our family". That may not always be the best approach, especially if you do not feel comfortable making such a promise. In that case, your child will pick up your cues of discomfort and receive mixed messages leading to confusion. You may feel more comfortable saying that our country's leaders are doing all they can to keep us safe, and you are doing everything to keep your child and family safe.

- Talk to children about their fears. Some parents may think that bringing up the subject of terrorism and asking children what they think and feel may heighten their fears, when having children keep their thoughts and fears to themselves is actually more detrimental. It is helpful for parents to begin the conversation. Parents may begin by simply asking children what they have seen or heard on the TV or radio, and what they think about it. However, it is important not to pressure a child who is not ready to speak about it. The problem will not be resolved in one session. Keep open the lines of communication for ongoing dialogue. Remember that it is important to listen to whatever your child has to say. Provide opportunities for discussion, such as returning home from school or at the dinner table. Do not dismiss or try to minimize any expressed fear or anxiety. Simply listen to your child, communicate that you understand, and provide comfort.
- Stick to routines, or create new ones if you do not have a routine. This is helpful around mealtimes, bedtimes, activities, etc. Routines and knowing what to expect help provide children with a sense of security and familiarity, especially during times of stress.
- Monitor what your child views through the media. Young children may actually think that the attacks are happening again, and this can re-traumatize older children. Even if you think that your child is too young to comprehend words and images from TV, your child can pick up on your emotional reaction and be affected. You are better off to watching the news while your child is not around to hear or see it.
- Provide physical comfort and extra nurturance. Hugs, saying “I love you,” or an unexpected note in the lunch box can help a child to feel safe and cared for. Even teenagers, who may shrug your attempts of affection, need to be comforted.
- Be mindful of possible stress reactions. This includes regressing to previous behaviors, such as thumb sucking and bed wetting. Do not bring much attention or embarrass your child regarding these regressions. Also, address any misperceptions that you may see in your child’s play or conversations.
- Be prepared to answer questions. Prepare an answer to what your child might ask you so that you are better equipped to respond. You may want to consult with your partner and other important people in your child’s life for consistency in responding. These may include questions about death, why bad things happened, will anything happen to them or someone they love, etc.
- If possible, avoid major changes, major decision making, and separation from important caregivers during this time.
- Incorporate soothing and relaxing activities into your child’s schedule. This may include exercise such as biking or walking together, or quiet times such as listening to music and reading books together.

Remember that adults are affected emotionally as well by acts of terrorism in the world, and we may experience a heightened concern about the safety of our family and our loved ones. The

better you are able to take care of your own needs and feelings, the better you will be able to meet the needs of your child. Take care of yourself!