

# Helping Children to Process Acts of Terrorism

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When acts of terror occur, we adults are filled with sadness and shock; worries about our own security and the security of those we love may become sharply increased in the aftermath of such devastation. Despite feeling confused and vulnerable ourselves, we feel called upon to offer explanation and reassurance to our children.

Children and adults alike will have both practical and theological questions: How can we be protected from terrorism? Where is God? Why would God allow such things to happen?

The most helpful response we can offer is to listen. But what can we do and say to help children through these difficult conversations?

Jewish tradition implores us to face difficult situations together, choosing life and purposeful action even in the face of loss and uncertainty. There is no way to deny the pain and confusion that tragedy stirs, but there are some guidelines that can help children cope.

## **Limit Access to Media**

When tragic and violent news is all over the media, children may not be able to avoid exposure to them, but it's healthier for kids to speak with a trusted adult who can listen and provide age-appropriate responses. Adults should be prepared to answer their questions and provide reassurance.

## **Listen to Questions and Concerns**

Allow children to tell you what they have heard, ask questions, and express their feelings. You may start the conversation by asking gentle questions about what's worrying them or provide the opportunity to show their concerns through art. It's OK to correct misinformation they may have heard, but don't share more information than needed, and avoid gory details. If kids bring them up, steer the conversation to a less frightening place by acknowledging that these things are true and scary – but also rare.

## **Understand That Children of Different Ages Have Different Needs**

All kids have individual ways of processing information and managing distress, so there is no cookie-cutter approach, but these basic guidelines help differentiate responses amongst age groups.

**Young children may simply need to have the tragedy acknowledged.**

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- Protect them from hearing what they will not understand, and reassure them that adults are working to keep them safe.
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- Provide toys and art materials to allow for non-verbal expression.
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- Maintain a sense of security by continuing regular routines such as meals, baths, bedtime stories, etc.
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- Be alert to increased separation anxiety, tearfulness, defiance, or problems with sleeping or toileting.

**School-aged children may grasp more facts, but they still need to be made to feel secure.**

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- Be honest, but remain optimistic, explaining the low likelihood of violence at home.

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- Stress that Jewish tradition encourages us to help those affected by tragedy, and point out all the instances of people helping others, including police, first responders, *tsaddikim* (helpers), etc.
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- Try to alleviate blame in kids who feel that bad things could have been prevented, as well as disappointment in adults for not being able to avert tragedy. Don't be alarmed if they talk about using superpowers or violence to prevent such events; fantasies may help them feel less helpless.
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- Help them forget adult concerns by returning their focus to the day-to-day life of school, family, hobbies, and activities.

**Teens are likely to have the most details and the most difficulty seeking help.**

They want to seem independent, yet such events may stir strong feelings of helplessness and fear. Desperately wishing for the world to make sense, teens are also old enough to recognize when it seems unstable.

- Don't press teens to speak about the situation more than they choose, and respect each teen's way of coping.
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- Be patient with teens' reactions, which may change sharply and often. Teens may seem very mature one moment and childish at the next. This is normal and age-appropriate.
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- Don't shelter teens from the opportunity to understand the situation, but resist the temptation to turn them into confidantes or seek more support from them than is fair.
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- Offer avenues for helping, such as raising money for victims, working to increase tolerance, or taking classes on how to provide emergency medical care.
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- Help teens see the good in the world and remind them that even in a world in which there is war and terrorism, we continue to work toward peace. It's important to encourage teens, who may be prone to black and white thinking, to recognize the compassion and concern shown by police, clergy, congregations, and communal organizations that provide assistance.

## **Provide Avenues for Action**

Everyone feels better when they can do something positive in the face of situations that make them feel helpless. Encourage kids to embrace our Jewish tradition of taking constructive action in the face of tragedy by helping those who have been affected and by honoring lives lost. They can write letters of support to the families of those affected, collect *tzedakah* for relevant charitable organizations, and light candles in memory of the dead.

## **Provide Opportunities for Spiritual and Communal Support**

Though children may have questions about how to maintain faith in God and humankind, we do not have to resolve all of these questions to find strength from a tradition that says we should come together to comfort, support, and inspire one another at times of tragedy and loss. Through our spiritual and communal practices, we teach children that life is precious and worth sustaining.

## **Know When and Where to Seek Professional Help**

Seek help from a mental health professional if a child:

- continues to show inconsolable fear and anxiety;
- is more withdrawn or more defiant; become increasingly interested in play based on violent themes; cannot be consoled; or
- exhibits or threatens violence toward himself or others.

Parents who are overcome by anxiety may also benefit from professional help in overcoming trauma. Social service agencies, mental health clinics, school guidance counselors, private mental health practitioners, and pediatricians may all be helpful; consider specific programs for children and families who have been affected by traumatic violence.

We can remind children that, though we cannot control everything that happens in life, each of us is best able to face life's hardships when we feel loved and cherished by others. Focusing on strengthening our ties to friends, family, and community helps us through difficult conversations and tough life situations.

Together, we can take actions that restore a sense that there is indeed love, justice, protection, and order in our world – even though it is also a world in which terrible tragedies sometimes occur