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Helping Your Children Cope with the News of Reported Terrorist Attacks by Laura Jana, M.D., F.A.A.P.

Our nation is reeling from the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. When horrendous events like these occur, it not only leaves each and every adult shaken and mired in disbelief, it becomes impossible to shelter our children from the reality of what is happening. While we struggle to comprehend these awful events, it is important that we take into account our children's perspective and help them cope as well. No matter how upset we are by the grim reality that our country is not as safe as we would like it to be, we have to offer our children some semblance of security in their world.

Steps parents can take

There are several steps parents can take to comfort their children and help them make some sense of the tragedy:

- **Personal safety and the safety of the people you love.** Offer immediate reassurance in any way possible to make sure that your child knows that those people closest to him are OK. First, even though it may seem obvious, spell out to your child that the members of his immediate family--Mom, Dad, brothers and sisters--are all safe. This is essential even if you live nowhere near the site of one of the attacks. Next, reassure your child about other relatives--Grandma and Granddad, for example. Repeating the list of dear ones who are all right will be comforting for you and your children. If possible, you may want to let your children talk to them on the phone or via email.
- **Structure.** Try to maintain the daily schedule as best as you can. If you normally go to the park or drop your child off at preschool, do those things. A regular routine gives children a sense of structure and security.
- **Details and distance.** Although you may feel a need to keep the television on to catch each unfolding event, for the sake of your young children, it's best to turn it off while they're in the room (or you might consider listening to the radio using earphones). Children (and all people) are more able to handle shocking news when it is not immediate in time, and when it is presented in print, rather than television. If your children do watch the news, make sure that you sit with them to help explain what is happening and answer their questions.
- **People in charge.** Let your child know that people in authority--the President, the mayor, teachers--are all making sure that everyone is going to be safe. Remind your child that *you* are also making sure that he is safe. That, after all, is your main job as a parent.
- **Maintaining perspective.** If your child overhears that a plane has crashed or a building has collapsed, you can reassure him that almost all planes and buildings are still completely safe. These bad events only happened in a very few, specific places.

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- **Awareness of emotions.** Even if children are too young to fully understand what is happening as tragedy unfolds, from a very early age, they are acutely aware of the emotional state of their parents. It's fine to let your children know that you are upset and sad, but make it clear that you're not upset with *them*, and try to be as calm and reassuring as possible.
- **Patience.** As you try to process this tragedy, you must expect that your children, no matter how young, may show signs of distress in response--whether it is in the form of fussiness, fear, nightmares, or tantrums. Expect these normal reactions, and be ready to deal with them with understanding and patience.
- **Mutual support.** It's very important to pay attention to your own levels of stress and shock. If you feel, as many of us do, a sense of unreality or being dazed, or if you feel a physical response to the news--tenseness in the chest, for example--these are normal and expectable responses to the tragedy. As soon as you can, find a friend, relative, or colleague, and talk about your feelings--and listen in turn to theirs. Getting this support for yourself is crucial, so that you will be able to be calm and confident with your children.

Find more information online:

<http://www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,677,00.html>

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