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Coping with the Emotional Fallout by Robert Needlman, M.D., F.A.A.P.

As horrifying as recent terrorist attacks were, the days to come are sure to pose even more emotional challenges for our children. For adults and children alike, the first response to an overwhelming disaster can be a sense of unreality. After the initial shock wears off and the facts sink in, then other emotions, such as sadness, fear, and anger, are likely to emerge.

Like adults, children often have a delayed response to witnessing traumatic events. They tend to take their cues from the adults around them, but may respond in ways that are hard for adults to understand. Some clearly act upset, crying or clinging. Many continue to play as though nothing had happened, but are very aware of the mood and conversation of the adults around them. Later, they may ask questions or show through their play or behavior that they have been affected emotionally.

The closer you are to the traumatic events--perhaps because you live near one of the sites of violence or have relatives who were directly affected--the more intense your emotional response, as well as your child's, is likely to be. But the unfortunate fact is that everyone in our society was affected, and every child will observe and have to deal with the emotional fallout as the adults around them review, discuss, debate, and react to the events.

Observe children's responses

Some children's reactions will be easy to interpret. They will blow up block buildings over and over, or crash a toy airplane. They will draw explosions and smoke, as they saw on television. Other reactions will be less obvious. Children may act more serious, with less spontaneous joy, or look in a worried way at the sky or buildings along the street, as though they might burst into flames. Other children may be unusually wild or disobedient, which is just their way of dealing with the strong emotions around them.

Children's artwork may be indirectly related to the traumatic events. A child may draw a sad-looking house, for example, or a dog that "is very sick, and he might die," as the little artist might explain. Another child might make a happy scene with a sun and flowers, declaring, "I want everyone to feel happy again."

Verbal children may ask many questions, or ask the same question over and over. Others may ask one question (about the plane blowing up, for example), accept a parent's answer in a matter-of-fact way, then go back to playing. Although they seem unaffected, they are processing your answer. Hours or even days later, they may ask the next part of the question: "Did the people in the plane die?"

It's important to recognize that all of these behaviors are attempts to deal with the upsetting, frightening emotions raised by the traumatic events.

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What you can do

Children need permission to deal with difficult emotions, just as adults do. They also need to have the freedom *not* to deal with emotions, at least outwardly, until they are ready to handle them.

Some specific things you can do include:

- **Talk with your child about her feelings.** If you notice her looking sad, anxious, or upset without obvious reason, ask your child if she is thinking about the plane crashes or the buildings that fell down yesterday. If she says "yes," let her know that you have been thinking about the same thing.
- **Accept your child's emotions.** Children need to know that any feelings they have are OK. Children who have grown up with strong moral principles may worry that it is wrong to feel very angry, or to imagine taking revenge. Others may think that it is a sign of weakness to feel scared. Worry or shame connected to these normal responses can make the emotional strain worse.
- **Help your children find language for what happened.** Many of the words to describe what happened--terrorist attack, devastation, disaster, catastrophe--are too big for children to feel comfortable with, or even understand. They need simple, concrete words: the airplane crash, the building falling down, the fires, when all those people died in New York and Washington. Although you may be tempted to keep things a little vague and avoid such direct descriptions, they really do help children make sense of the events and give them the ability to talk about them.
- **Help your child use art.** Many children--especially young children--do better expressing feelings in pictures, rather than in words. Let your child have paper and crayons, and take seriously what she draws. Rather than just admiring the artwork, invite your child to tell you about it. If she doesn't feel like talking, that's OK, too.
- **Realize that play can be a coping mechanism.** Children's play is not frivolous. Children use play as a way to handle emotionally charged issues. It's important that parents accept their children's play, even if the themes are disturbing (death, for example), rather than trying to make the children play "happy" games. You can join your child in play simply by sitting quietly nearby. Or you can reflect the action in words, with little other comment--for example, "That building just fell down. What happened?" Play that has a repetitive, compulsive quality can be a sign of more severe upset--if a child repeatedly draws disturbing pictures, or instance, or *only* seems to play games that involve violence or death for more than a day or two.

Find more information online:

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

Created September 12, 2001

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