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## Teaching Your Children Tolerance in the Face of Violence by Laura Jana, M.D., F.A.A.P.

In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks on the United States, all of us have been looking for ways to regain control of our lives and to cope with our feelings of horror, loss, disbelief, fear, and anger.

For our children's sake--as well as our own--it is vitally important that we use only positive ways to deal with our emotions. We now have an opportunity to instill in our children some of the most valuable lessons they will ever learn about altruism, compassion, and kindness--extended not only toward their own friends and family, but toward *all* the innocent members of society.

If, on the other hand, we let ourselves fall into a destructive pattern of hatred, racism, and revenge, we risk instilling in our children those very same harmful traits and perpetuating a cycle of violence.

### Addressing the inevitable

In response to this week's terrifying events, many people have already begun to lash out--verbally, if not physically--against people living in the United States who come from (or whose ancestors came from) the Middle East. While many of us feel the need to express our anger about the vile acts that took place, it's important that you take the time to think long and hard about the message you are sending your children. Help them to respond in a healthy and constructive way instead of falling prey to the urge to act destructively on their natural feelings of anger.

Following is a list of several things you can do to counter the ugly accusations of racism, both before and after they present themselves:

- **Be proactive.** Don't sit around and hope for the best--that your child won't encounter racist proclamations. Discuss racial differences and commonalities with her so that she is empowered to speak out when other children say things she knows to be wrong. Work with your child's teachers and school administrators to ensure that children are being given a message of tolerance for those innocent members of our society who happen to come from the Middle East.
- **Find out what's being said.** The best way to address head-on the ugly rumors and racist remarks to which your children will inevitably be exposed is to ask what she has heard the other kids saying. When you understand exactly what rumors and remarks are being circulated, you can more effectively set the record straight and counter the bigotry.

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- **Discuss who is and who is not thought to be responsible.** After hearing of the attacks and the presumed involvement of Osama bin Laden, many people have been quick to assert that *everyone* of Middle Eastern descent is to blame. Yet many adults and most children know nothing about the intricacies of the decades-old Middle East conflict. They may simply be looking for somewhere to direct their anger. Make sure that your children understand that just because a group of Islamic terrorists are thought to be responsible does not mean that the entire world of Islam, or everyone from the Middle East, is to blame. By doing this, you can send a powerful message against racism, and you can help your child come to understand and appreciate one of the most important aspects of the United States: its ethnic diversity.
- **Acknowledge that it's normal to feel angry and to desire revenge.** Whenever tragedy takes place, it is human nature to seek an explanation for what has happened, and in cases of violence, to want revenge and strike back. Acknowledging these feelings, both in yourself and your child, is important. But it's even more important to teach your child how to handle these normal emotions. Feeling them is OK; acting out in violent or racist ways is not.
- **Offer concrete analogies that children can understand.** In explaining to your child about where to place blame, you can use her classroom as an analogy: Just because one child in the class does something bad or wrong does not mean that *all* the children in the class are bad, nor does it mean that they all should be punished. Similarly, although one group of cruel fanatics is thought to be responsible for the recent atrocities, it does not mean that all people with a similar background are to blame.

### Find more information online:

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

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