

# Helping Children Cope After A Disaster

I have received some helpful information from Mary Bridge Children's Hospital and Children's Hospital for helping children cope with the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

Children are all different in how they respond to a tragic event. The same child might react differently at different times. If your child doesn't mention the terrorist attacks, don't assume that they haven't heard about it. Ask them what they have heard. Many kids will keep fears and inaccurate information to themselves. Chances are very high that your child has heard other children discuss this at school. Provide your child with accurate information that is appropriate to their age. Some children will not want to talk about it and that's okay, but let them know you are open to talking. Some behaviors that might tip you off that your child is having a difficult time might include: difficulty sleeping, lack of concentration, defiant behavior, irritable moods, crying, bed-wetting, nightmares, bodily complaints, clinging behavior (separation anxiety), etc. For a while, it's okay if your child needs to sleep with a light on, reverts to earlier behavior such as thumb sucking, etc. Just give them lots of hugs and assurance.

**LIMIT YOUR CHILD'S EXPOSURE TO MEDIA COVERAGE!!!** Even though it's been several weeks, it's still being widely covered by the media. And it probably will continue for a long time. If your child has already seen the chilling scenes, try to keep your child from seeing them over and over. Younger children should be exposed to less than older children. If you have older and younger children in your home, make sure the younger children are not seeing things that are inappropriate for them. As the parent, limit your own media viewing to times when your children are not present. Sit with your child for any media coverage that they are exposed to. This way you can explain what is happening.

Children need to feel safe. Tell them they are safe. Many kids have told me they are scared this could happen in Seattle or Tacoma and they could be killed. Or they are afraid if we go to war, they will be killed. Assure them that even if these things do happen, they are relatively safe in Auburn. Remember, kids don't fully understand war and it really scares them. Limit media coverage of impending war discussion.

Be calm! Children often react similarly to their parents. How you respond, will directly affect how your child reacts. Honestly share your feelings but be careful to do it in a calm way.

Validate your child's feelings. Do not ignore or dismiss your child's fear. Let them know their feelings are normal and that you feel

similarly. This lets them know they can talk to you about their feelings and trust that you'll take them seriously.

Remove your child's sense of helplessness by becoming active. Children may have ideas about what your family can do to support our nation during this time. Ideas are: write letters, draw pictures, display the American flag, donate toys or money, light a candle, religious acts, etc.

If you have questions about your child's reaction, please give your school counselor a call.

By Shari Dixon  
School Counselor  
Lea Hill Elementary