

F O C U S

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE

Tips for Talking to Kids about Trauma

After a tragedy like the Paris attacks, kids will have questions. How do we respond? In a video that has gone viral after the November 13, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, a father comforts his son, who is worried about “bad guys” shooting them. “They may have guns, but we have flowers,” the father says, referring to the impromptu memorials people had been laying out to honor the victims. “France is our home.” After some back-and-forth, the boy ultimately seems comforted by his father’s words—and millions of viewers have been moved by the man’s tenderness, patience, and care (www.youtube.com/watch?v=61aCBmTxK7k). The video reminds us that while we cannot always protect our children from witnessing violence and tragedy in the world, we can comfort and communicate with them in the most healing way possible. But many of us don’t always know the best way to do that—we may lack the confidence and presence of mind demonstrated by that father, later identified as Angel Le. Fortunately, parenting and education experts have produced a wealth of resources for having difficult

conversations with kids about tragedies like the Paris attacks. **Initiate the conversation.** Just because children aren’t talking about a tragedy doesn’t mean they’re not thinking about it, experts say. They may sense your discomfort and not want to upset you by bringing it up, or they may be too overwhelmed by their own feelings to express them. “Without factual information, children (and adults) ‘speculate’ and fill in the empty spaces to make a complete story of explanation,” explains psychiatrist Bruce D. Perry in a guide for the nonprofit ChildTrauma Academy on “Helping Traumatized Children.” In most cases, the child’s fears and fantasies are much more frightening and disturbing than the truth.” As soon as the child asks questions or seems to be thinking about the event, it’s time to have a conversation, Perry advises. Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), in a guide called “Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World,” suggests that children as young as four or five can benefit from talking about the event. To open up the conversation, you might start with questions like

these: “How do you feel about what’s happening in the world?” What are you or your friends thinking and talking about in terms of the world situation?” “Are you and your friends talking about what happened in Paris? I’d be really interested in hearing about what you think. Let me know if you want to talk.” **Reassure them.** Tragedy can rattle our sense of safety, and our children’s. One goal of this conversation is to provide them with the reassurance that: things will get better; you will be there for them; they can ask you questions anytime and; they are safe, and so are the people they care about. To make your reassurances more believable, you can point out some of the safety measures that are being taken, like explaining what security guards do. “Children need to hear very clearly that their parents are doing all that they can to take care of them and to keep them safe. They also need to hear that people in the government and other grownups they don’t even know are working hard to keep them safe, too,” reads a quote from Fred “Mister” Rogers on his website, which contains

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Empathy is the
faculty to resonate
with the feelings of
others.

When we meet
someone who is
joyful, we smile.
When we witness
someone in pain,
we suffer in reso-
nance with his or
her suffering.

Mathieu
Ricard

Tips for Talking to Kids about Trauma (continued)

a section dedicated to helping children after tragic events. **Listen.** Although we always want to be good listeners for our children, it's especially crucial in the wake of traumatic events. That means giving them our full attention, and not jumping to judge or minimize what they're saying—no matter how silly or illogical it may seem. For example, if a child is afraid that every plane overhead carries a bomb, it might be better to say, "I understand why you're scared, but actually..." instead of stuttering out a horrified "No, of course not!" "By your ability to listen calmly, even to concerns which might seem unrealistic, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with," the ESR guide explains. If children's fears sound vague or jumbled, parents can help by gently summarizing what they're hearing: "It sounds like what you're feeling is..." A few clarifying questions can also help: "That's interesting, can you tell me more about that?" "What do you mean by...?" "How long have you been feeling...?" **Find out what they know.** By listening, parents can discover the snippets and rumors that their children have already absorbed about a tragedy. If it's unclear, a simple "What have you heard about this?" should do the trick. A key purpose of this conversation is to correct any misconceptions children may have picked up while at the same time offering more concrete information. You can tailor the level of detail depending on their age and how many unanswered questions are weighing on their minds. Some of those questions may be tricky to answer—and in that case, ESR suggest responses like these: "I don't know the answer to that and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many thoughtful people throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue." "That's an interesting question, and I don't know that answer. How can we find out together?" "The process of

figuring out where to get the information and going through the steps to obtain it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them," the guide explains. "In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding." **Encourage children to share their feelings.** Sadness, anxiety, fear, stress, even excitement—all feelings are possible in response to tragedy and violence. Whatever children are feeling, Mister Rogers encouraged parent to show understanding and acceptance: "If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may think something is wrong with them when they do feel that way," he said. "If we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them." We might even encourage children to express

Encouraging kids to do something about what they're feeling can give them an outlet and restore their sense of control.

their feelings in a non-verbal way, through drawing, writing, singing, or play. **Share your feelings.** Experts seem to agree that sharing your feelings with a child can be beneficial, with some caveats. First, you want to communicate that you can handle whatever it is you're feeling. "Children get a chance to see that even though upset, you can pull yourself together and continue on. Parents hear it often: Be a role model. This applies to emotions, too," explain the experts at the American Psychological Association in their guide on how to talk to children about news and tragedies. (If your anger or worries threaten

to overwhelm you or distract you from your child you might not be ready to have this conversation yet.) Another risk is that your feelings might add to or replace the ones children are already experiencing. A serious pitfall is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and fears for them, rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have," explains the ESR guide. "We might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying our need to 'give' children something rather than satisfying their need to be heard and understood." As a result, ESR suggests limited expressions of emotion, such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I feel sad too." This approach avoids the pitfalls mentioned above while demonstrating acceptance, showing empathy, and not denying what you're feeling. **Focus on the good.** Where there is tragedy, there is also heroism—acts by police officers, doctors, or ordinary citizen that restore our faith in humanity fight when it is shaken. The forces of good spring into action with their love, support, and generosity. In Paris, for example, many restaurant and shop owners opened their doors and sheltered pedestrians as the attacks were going on and through the night. A quote from Mister Rogers is often cited after tragedies to make this point beautifully: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world." Entire systems for this very purpose, such as the Red Cross or the study of earthquake proof architecture. The University of

igan Health System encourages parents to use tragedy as an opportunity to educate kids on all three ways people are working to keep us safe. The message is: There are good people all around us. **Encourage children to act.** When we feel the pain of others, compassion motivates us to help and to transform that pain into a feeling of connection and support. Encouraging kids to *do* something about what they're feeling can give them an outlet and restore their sense of control. Some suggestions might include: writing letters to victims and their families; sending thank you notes to doctors, paramedics, firefighters, or police; setting up a community study group to learn more about the

issue; organizing a town meeting to create an action plan; writing a letter to the editor and; raising money for charity. "You can help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people's concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer," explains the ESR guide. **Know when to seek outside help.** What does a normal reaction to tragedy look like? There may be no normal, but experts seem to agree that if more than three months have passed and your child is still suffering—from anxiety, distraction, fear, hopelessness, sleep problems, nightmares, sadness, angry

outbursts, or headaches—it might be time to consult a mental health professional. Every child is different, and how he/she reacts will depend on factors such as how close to home the tragedy was, whether he/she was traumatized in the past, and his/her general level of mental health. The good news is that kids are very resilient, and they can even inspire us with their feats of strength and optimism—as that young boy in Paris did.

Source: Kira M. Newman is an editor and web producer at the Greater Good Science Center. She is also the creator of *The Year of Happy*, a year-long course in the science of happiness, and *CafeHappy*, a Toronto-based meetup.

Nine Steps to Forgiveness

1. Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not OK. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning the action. In forgiveness you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.
4. Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognizing that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what offended you two minutes—or ten years—ago.
5. At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body's fight or flight response.
6. Give up expecting things from your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity and work hard to get them. However, these are "unenforceable rules:" You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.
7. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.
8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings, and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have rather than attending to what you do not have.
9. Amend the way you look at your past so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive.

Source: Fred Luskin, Ph.D. author of *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)

We're 32 times more likely to laugh when...

others are around. And it's not because everyone's a comedian. "Laughter is more about relationships than humor," says neuroscientist Robert R. Provine, the author of *Curious Behavior: Yawning, Laughing, Hiccupping,*

and Beyond. "You go to a party and have a room full of laughing people, but they're not all telling jokes. What's happening is playful interactions between individuals." In fact, Provine's research at the University of Maryland, Balti-

more County, found that everyday expressions like "I'll see you guys later" and "It was nice meeting you too" elicited more giggles than punch lines did. In other words, laughter isn't all that it's cracked up to be.

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Things to Do When Stressed

The goal is to calm and contain your feelings. Try many things until you have found the things that work for you. It may not be listed here so keep trying no matter how silly you may feel trying them. Try to include things that appeal to many of your senses (touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste). **Source:** www.almhca.com

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|--------------------------------|---|--|---------------------------|
| Breathe | Repot a plant | Tear up a phonebook | Beat a pillow |
| Listen to music | Play games on the computer | Read a book/magazine | Shoot hoops |
| Rock in a rocking chair | Put a puzzle together | Tear up paper and throw it (piece by piece into the trash) | Mow the lawn |
| Play with your pet | Sew | Work on a scrap book | Build something |
| Weed a garden | Walk around the mall | Search the internet | Yoga |
| Scream into a pillow | Play golf | Do your nails | Go ice or roller skating |
| Take a bath | Make a collage | Write a poem | Do yard work |
| Watch a movie | Clean the house | Organize CD collection | Play a video game |
| Paint | Throw snowballs at a tree | Rearrange the furniture | Blow bubbles |
| Pray/meditate | Play Tennis | Wander around a bookstore | Finger paint |
| Go for a walk | Beat a drum | Play racquetball | Go swimming |
| Journal | Play instrument (i.e. piano, flute, guitar) | Take pictures of nature | Take a nap |
| Call somebody | Ride a bike | | Get a massage |
| Write affirmations to yourself | | | Read funny greeting cards |