

Consumer and Family Sciences

Department of
Child Development
and Family Studies

Parenting in the Wake of Terrorism

Judith Myers-Walls,
Extension specialist,
human development

The initial shock from Sept. 11, 2001, has eased. Families have returned to many ordinary activities. Yet, many families are mourning, and some are still afraid. Troops have been mobilized, and security has been increased in many settings. The onset of bombing and the engagement of troops introduce new challenges. All observers say that it will be a long fight. Parents have tried to explain the original attack, but what next?

Parents are still responsible for guiding, supporting, and loving their children, but the environment is different. In times of stress, anger, fear, and military intervention, parents face a number of challenges, but the way that parents care for their children can be a powerful force to turn events around. The hints provided here are based on two assumptions: that children and families are affected by world events and news media, and that parents would benefit from seeking alternatives to violence in childrearing and in their children's lives.

Keep listening, and be available

Many children were confused at the beginning of this long journey. Many children are still confused about the initial events and will be confused about the current happenings. Some children have not yet reacted, but they might in the next weeks or months.

With every new change in the situation, children may need new explanations and new reassurance. As children grow and change, the explanations also need to change. Parents cannot have one talk with their children and be done. Unfortunately, it may be continually more difficult to explain events.

Parents do not need to have all the answers, though. The most important thing for them to do is to listen and to help children try to find the information they need. And parents have the responsibility to share their values as they interpret events.

Build feelings of safety and security

Heightened security efforts are obvious in the United States and in other countries after the attacks. Airports, courthouses, sports stadiums and arenas, and even schools are restricting containers and baggage and are using metal detectors and personal searches. Personnel in camouflage clothing and with

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M-16 rifles are standing in full sight in crowded airports. The restrictions on air space have limited the coverage of sports events using helicopters and blimps.

Kids notice the increased security. While many adults may welcome the changes and feel that they increase security, children and young people (and some adults) may see them as constant reminders of danger instead.

Parents could help children deal with the fears that come from the additional caution in ways that fit with their beliefs.

- All parents can reassure their children that most people are kind and do not want to hurt them.
- Those parents who feel that the precautions are necessary and helpful can point out to the children how those actions are designed to make the world safer.
- Those who are distressed by the actions may want to avoid situations where the security efforts are obvious, so that they and their children will not be reminded.
- Those who feel that the security is excessive and increases fears and distrust may want to speak up and work toward reducing the defensive responses.
- Many other reactions are possible, and parents can tailor their interaction with their children to fit their own reactions.

Decrease the violence in your children's world

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Children are likely to be distressed by the expressions of aggression on any side and by threats to the well-being of any people.

When the people that children depend on most — their parents — use violence to accomplish their goals, children may feel unsafe. They also could learn that violence is a good way to accomplish goals.

Parents face a special challenge at this time. People have said that it is wrong for terrorists to

use violence, but some believe that violence is the best way to try to eliminate terrorism. Parents need to explore their feelings regarding these issues and support those beliefs with their own behavior.

Parents can increase children's feelings of security and optimism by avoiding harsh or coercive discipline. They can learn to use discipline methods that are based on reasoning, distraction, logical consequences, and empathy. They can look for the feelings and motivations that lead to children's misbehavior, and help those children find positive ways to reach their goals.

Parents can look at children's toys and get rid of those toys that celebrate violence. Replace guns with flashlights and magic wands. Replace war play with firefighting and space exploration. Children may need to act out the violence they have experienced, but their toys should let them transform the violence into peace.

Manage anger and help children do the same

A basic principle of anger management is the idea that anger is a secondary emotion. That means that anger grows out of other feelings.

In this situation, people's angry feelings may be coming out of feelings of fear, threat, vulnerability, or other emotions. Some people are upset that the dominance of the United States is being challenged, and others may have directed their anger toward the United States precisely because of that dominance.

If you feel angry, explore where those feelings begin. Identify ways that you can express some of those original feelings without hurting other people.

Do the same with your children. Help them explore the feelings that are leading to anger. Keep in mind that anger is a legitimate emotion, but that it is not appropriate to use anger as an excuse to hurt others.

Separate the person from the behavior

When unpleasant events occur, it is tempting to blame one or more people. It is tempting to

label some people as bad or evil. This implies that those people are not capable of doing good or positive things.

It can help to think instead about the actions or behaviors that have caused problems or were bad choices. The people were not bad, but their actions were.

This is important to parenting, because children also make mistakes. If we communicate to children that people are either bad or good, children may become concerned about themselves and how they are viewed. If they do something wrong or make a mistake, are they bad people? Are they capable of being good or kind?

Label the behavior rather than the person. When the child misbehaves, be specific about what the child did wrong. Assure the child that he or she can do better the next time. Help children learn that they can grow and change.

Avoid fostering hate

Some people have responded to the crisis of Sept. 11 by developing suspicion, fear, and even hatred of people of Arabian descent and of Muslims.

As many commentators and the President have pointed out, the actions of the terrorists are not representative of true Islamic faith. It is difficult for some people to decide, however, if people of that background can be trusted.

It is especially important for parents to overcome those and other prejudices and fears. Children who learn hate at the feet of their parents are likely to carry those feelings for most or all of their lives.

Parents need to help young people learn how to take reasonable precautions when approaching people. They need to learn how to be safe while they are also reaching out to learn about and make friends with new people.

Find activities that will allow children and the entire family to get to know a variety of cultures. Learn about your own culture and celebrate the richness of diverse cultures together.

Help children and youth deal with changes in friendships

As the government and other officials make decisions, some people agree with those decisions, and others disagree. Individuals also will make decisions about how to act in this time.

Before September, children may have been friends with lots of different people. After September, people are talking about different things and may take sides. Old friendships may not feel comfortable any more.

Parents also may find themselves uncomfortable with old friendships. They may not want their children to spend time with the same children and families they visited in the past.

More information from Purdue Extension is available at the *Terrorism and Children* Web site at <http://www.ces.purdue.edu/terrorism/children/index.html>

Pacifist children and youth may have a difficult time when military actions are very popular. Some children may express racist views that upset other children. Some families may react to the increased sense of danger by not trusting anyone.

Parents can help children and young people find ways to be friends, even if they don't agree with the other person. They can help children learn to express their own ideas. They can also help them learn to find things they share with other people, even if they do not agree on everything.

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