

## Advice to Parents on Talking to Children During a Time of Crisis

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As an author who has written on the topic of crisis counseling and intervention (Sandoval, 1988, 2001, Brock, Sandoval & Lewis, 1996, 2001), when the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 occurred, my university's public communications office listed me as resource for the media. In fact, the first news I received of the attack came via a telephone call from a campus media liaison. Shortly thereafter, with my permission, the campus released the following quote taken from this telephone call:

"How should parents and teachers talk to children about the attack? Be willing to talk about children's fears, mistaken understandings and feelings about injury and death, but don't assume too much. Wait for questions and listen very carefully for helpful clues to their thoughts within the questions. A child's questions will indicate what he or she wants to know and what the level of understanding is. When you respond, model calmness and caring."

Following this initial contact and news release, I spent the following few days from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> responding to requests from the media for information and advice. I was interviewed by two local newspapers, and appeared on two television news programs. I served as a panel member on a two-hour local television discussion program, was interviewed at length for a local public broadcasting public affairs program, and was interviewed by the producer of a another public radio call-in program in San Francisco.

Finally I was contacted by ABC News to work with them to produce a web-site to help parents talk to their children about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and for a special program with Peter Jennings to air on the Saturday.

In dealing with the media, I have learned that it is important to prepare a set of specific talking points or messages and to attempt to convey them clearly. When I have been approached to comment, I have made the following seven points.

1. Children, particularly young ones, are more sensitive to adults emotions than they are to their words. So my first suggestion is to wait until you are composed and collected before you discuss things with them, so that your manner communicates (non-verbally) that you are in control.
2. The adult's tasks are to protect, connect and direct. Parents should protect children from unnecessary exposure, and this means monitoring their TV watching. Children will learn about horrible events, but they don't have to be watching horrific scenes over and over. When they do watch TV, parents should watch alongside, so that they can reassure the child they are safe by physical contact and proximity. They can also answer any questions the children have.
3. To connect means talking to children and attending particularly to their questions. Questions should be encouraged, since they reveal what children wish to know and whether or not they are ready to talk. Questions should be answered at a level appropriate to the child's level of understanding. Young children, preschoolers and kindergarten age, will be mainly concerned about their own safety and the safety of their families. They can be reassured that they and their family are safe and that they are loved. As they grow older, children in middle childhood will ask more complex

questions about causes of things, although they will be interested in concrete causes and effects, not abstractions. Adolescents will be most interested in ideological issues, and abstractions but will be particularly idealistic.

4. What ever they are, answer the questions, but do not elaborate more than necessary. Adults have a tendency to give more explanation than many children want. Talking is not the only way to connect and for children to express themselves. Drawing and music also are ways to communicate.
5. Directing children is also important. We all feel the loss of control after such an attack. Children will want adults to be able to take some action and to create some structure for them. Parents can direct children do something positive, such as donation to the Red Cross, make a memorial, or make a "friendship bracelet" or other gesture of support. Of course, for the religious praying and attending church services is also doing something.
6. Parents should also direct the conversation with their children. They should ask for questions and they should be comfortable in sharing some of their own feelings of sadness and shock. One way to start a conversation is to talk about how other children think and feel and ask them if they feel that way too. Parents should listen for mistaken ideas and challenge them. At all times, parents should be attentive and be sure they have completely understood their child's thoughts and feelings. Parents should also acknowledge when they don't know something.
7. Children will need to get back to a routine soon. They will need some relief in games and sports from the onslaught of media and mourning. Parents should not leave children to their own devices.

These were my main messages, and in various forums I had a chance to deliver one or more points. Some of these exchanges were very limited and unsatisfying, others were gratifying in that I was able to make all seven points and have them accepted and elaborated by the media. In addition to my own contribution, I was able to direct the public to other sources of information contained on web-sites such as the following:

Coping with Emotions after a Disaster

<http://www.psychworks.com/PTSD%20response.htm>

Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events:

<http://helping.apa.org/therapy/traumaticstress.html>

<http://helping.apa.org/daily/terrorism.html>

After a Disaster: Steps You Can Take to Cope with a Stressful Situation

<http://www.wright.edu/sopp/cps/TraumaticStress.html>

The Child Survivor of Traumatic Stress

<http://users.umassmed.edu/Kenneth.Fletcher/kidsurv.html>

Helping Children After a Disaster: Facts for Families from the American

Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

<http://www.aacap.org/>

National Center for PTSD literature base

<http://www.ncptsd.org/>

It is difficult to know how many parents I was able to reach with my messages. Informally I had a number of people thank me for my advice and tell me that it was useful in talking with their children.

ABC had a 2 hour special with Peter Jennings on Saturday morning following the 9-11 event. They based their content on the advice from nearly 100 experts around the country, myself included. They posted the answers to at least 60 frequently asked questions on their website:

[http://abcnews.go.com/onair/DailyNews/pjr010915\\_kidsquestions.html](http://abcnews.go.com/onair/DailyNews/pjr010915_kidsquestions.html).

Several experts answered multiple questions. I answered three questions posted on the website.

I will never know who benefited from my advice on best practices, but would be satisfied if just one family was better able to cope with the events of September 11.

## **References**

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