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## Helping Children Cope with Terrorism

As resilient as they may seem, children can be severely affected by threatening events, including acts of terrorism. Their reactions can be influenced by both parental reaction and the media. Parents can learn how to help children cope with the effects of a terrorist attack through understanding typical coping signs, being able to recognize the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and taking advantage of assistance available to deal with these emotions.

### Why Children Feel Vulnerable

Vulnerability stems from many factors. Studies show that terrorist acts can make individuals feel more vulnerable than other types of traumatic events: a terrorist attack is typically an unanticipated and unexpected event that is instigated by another human being.

When an event is unexpected, such as an act of terrorism, feelings of personal security are taken away. Over time, individuals, adults in particular, can regain a sense of security after an unexpected event. However, children may have a more difficult time adjusting to life after an unexpected traumatic event: they lack a sense of context that adults possess, and do not have the tools to assess potential danger. Additionally, when the instigator of a traumatic event is another human, children may feel fearful of people in general.

The age of the child also plays a role in the recovery process. While researchers are still evaluating studies, there is some data to indicate that younger children have more difficulties coping with the event. Research indicates that older children, those closer to adolescence, can cope better than younger children due to three factors:

- Older children can evaluate the probability of personal danger more effectively than younger children.
- They understand the war in a context that younger children are unable to grasp.

- They are able to help in emergency situations, making them feel useful and more in control.

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### **What is PTSD**

Post-traumatic stress disorder was first diagnosed in the 1980s, when Vietnam veterans were found to experience similar traumatic repercussions from their participation in the war. However, any individual can experience PTSD, including children. Typically PTSD occurs following a traumatic event or after witnessing a life-threatening event. These events may range from terrorist attacks, sniper shootings and school violence to natural disasters, serious accidents, the death of a loved one or any act of personal violence, including rape or physical abuse. Four factors increase the likelihood that a child who has experienced a traumatic event will develop PTSD:

- The severity of the trauma.
- The parental reaction to the event.
- The physical proximity to the event.
- The availability and use of recovery resources.

Only two factors can be altered: the parental reaction and the use of resources.

### **Typical Symptoms of PTSD in Children**

It may be difficult to tell if a child is suffering from PTSD, particularly if he or she is too young to fully verbalize his or her feelings. Use the following as a guideline to identify PTSD symptoms typical in children:

- Parental clinging. Children tend to get upset when the parents leave, even if the situation is a routine one (e.g. being dropped off at school or being left with a babysitter).
- Avoidance of situations that bring up memories of the event. This may be avoiding a place, a toy or certain people.
- Sleep disorders. Typical indications are difficulty sleeping, nightmares or not wanting to sleep alone.
- General sense of fearfulness.

- Shutting down. The child may not be able to show any emotion, positive or negative, to routine events.
- Re-enactment of the event.

**Very young children (under the age of four) are not likely to exhibit common PTSD symptoms. However, be aware of:**

- Indications of generalized fears, such as separation anxiety, fear of strangers and avoidance of situations that are somehow related to the traumatic event.
- Sleep disturbances, such as nightmares, troubled sleep or fear of sleeping alone.
- A preoccupation with words or symbols that the child associates with the event.
- Play that includes re-enactment of the traumatic event.
- Loss of acquired developmental skills, such as toilet training.

**Elementary school-aged children experience some symptoms that adults typically do not exhibit. Be aware of:**

- Improper sequencing of trauma-related events during conversations.
- Post-traumatic play. This includes repetitive representations of specific events that occurred during the trauma. This compulsiveness does not reduce or relieve anxiety, as does normal play. An example would be a child who always wants to play shooting games after being exposed to a school shooting or a sniper attack.
- While adolescents display symptoms similar to those of adults, PTSD symptoms for teenagers may also include: Post-traumatic play.
- Traumatic re-enactment. This includes when the teenager incorporates certain aspects of the trauma into his or her daily activities. An example would be a teenager who shows an interest in carrying a gun after experiencing a school shooting.
- Impulsive and aggressive behaviors.

Following a terrorist attack, it is common for children not to exhibit any feelings at all, due to an emotional shutdown as they become emotionally overwhelmed by the event. While this is typical, it is not healthy: professional assistance should be sought immediately. In addition, watch for symptoms such as depression,

substance abuse and severe anxiety, as well as diminished ability to function in school or family life.

### **How a Parent Can Help**

Findings show that parents can be the biggest influence in a child's recovery from the traumatic event. A child's sense of well being is often derived from the parents. Therefore, it is important that you watch for the signs of PTSD in children, and get help if necessary. In addition, attempt to do the following:

- Be a guide for your child. If your demeanor is one of defeat, fear or anxiety, your child's demeanor is likely to be the same. While being honest with your child is vital, it is equally important to consider a young child's lack of contextual skills. Try to adapt to the situation and react in ways that are positive. Reassure your child. Tell your child that he or she is safe; offer emotional support; be available to talk and hug your child; and attempt to put the events in a proper context. If your child has suffered a personal loss, address the grieving process separate from any PTSD symptoms.
- Limit exposure to media. Studies show that children exposed to graphics or video of traumatic events can experience a disruption to their sense of emotional stability and safety. It is important to understand that children often can't tell what is a current event and what is a past event, especially when a video of the event is continuously shown on television or photos appear in newspapers and magazines. Monitor your child's access to media.
- Help your child develop coping skills. Regaining a sense of control in a difficult situation can help your child feel safer. Involvement in safety preparations and community projects can help. Establish a safety routine that your family can follow in the event of a traumatic event (similar to a home fire drill) and participate in neighborhood watches.
- Encourage your child to use his or her emotions in a positive way. This can be through assisting people he or she knows, such as an elderly relative or neighbor, or by raising donations and writing letters to thank the volunteers.

Take advantage of professional assistance. The intensity of the disaster and the recovery resources available play a large part in how children recover from a traumatic event. If your child was somehow directly connected to the event, whether he or she was part of the event or lost a loved one, professional help is vital. There are mental-health professionals specially trained to help children cope with traumatic events. Contact your employee-assistance program (EAP) for referrals, or call your child's school for more information.

## **Common Treatment for Children with PTSD**

The following interventions can help your child overcome symptoms of PTSD. Contact your EAP or pediatrician for more information.

- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). For children, CBT typically involves having the child discuss the traumatic event and establishing anxiety management techniques.
- Play therapy. This is used primarily with younger children who are unable to deal directly with the trauma. They are encouraged to use games, toys and art to process and resolve their feelings.
- Crisis intervention. When a traumatic event occurs, crisis intervention is necessary. It involves a clarification of the facts related to the events in an attempt to normalize PTSD reactions. Expression of feelings is encouraged and coping skills are discussed.

## **Additional Information and Counseling Resources**

**Call us for the support that you need. 1-888-290-4EAP (TDD: 1800-697-0353) or go to [www.GuidanceResources.com](http://www.GuidanceResources.com). Agency ID: FEDSOURCE**

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