

Discussing Hate and Violence With Your Children

Children are aware of what is happening in the world around them. Parents and educators cannot assume that children are unaffected by global events. When frightening and violent incidents occur, such as the attacks of September 11, both children and adults may experience a range of emotions including fear, confusion, sadness and anger.

To counteract fear and give reassurance, parents, teachers and day care providers can provide opportunities for children to express how they feel and channel their feelings into positive actions.

Discussions between adults and children in difficult situations can be an opening for reinforcing family and community values, beliefs and traditions. To learn more, take a look at the following advice that was developed by National PTA and the Anti-Defamation League.

Prepare

In order to provide the reassurance and guidance children need, adults should first come to terms with their own feelings. Explore and discuss with other adults your own feelings and perceptions. Recognize that your past experiences may influence how you look at current situations.

Be Alert

Be alert to signs of upset in children. These signs may include withdrawal, lack of interest, acting out, fear of school or other activities, or anything that deviates from the child's norm.

Listen

- Listen carefully in order to learn what children know and are thinking.
- Treat all children's questions with respect and seriousness; do not "shush," ignore or dismiss children.
- Clarify children's questions so that you can understand what is being asked, what has led to the question and how much information a child wants. A child who asks: "Why was the World Trade Center attacked?" could be curious about the political issues of the attacks, or may be asking, "Could I or someone I love be hurt in an attack?" A good way to clarify what a child wants to know is to repeat the question to the child; for example, "You've been thinking about the attacks on the World Trade Center and are wondering why they happened." In this way a child can say, "Yes, that is what I've been thinking," or can correct what you said in order to redirect the conversation to something he or she wants to discuss.
- Sometimes, without repeating the exact words, it is helpful to reflect what you think a child is feeling, as a way of giving a child the opportunity to confirm that you have understood, or to clarify. For example, you can say: "It sounds as if you're afraid that something like this might happen again."

Reassure

- Review the facts of what actually happened.
- Reassure children in age-appropriate ways that they are safe. When talking to toddlers, responses can be simple and direct: "I love you and I will always do everything I can to make you safe."
- Let children know that many people and organizations are working to make us safe, for example, police, rescue workers, and government and private agencies, such as ADL.
- Reassure children that while there are people who do things that are hard to understand, we live in a wonderful country and, for the vast majority of the time, we are safe.

Be Honest

- Answer questions as clearly and honestly as you can, using developmentally appropriate language and definitions. If you don't know the answer to a child's question, say so and make a plan to try to find out.
- Correct yourself if you give incomplete or inaccurate information. Don't be afraid of making a mistake; when we admit our mistakes, adults model for children how to admit their own mistakes. Be direct about acknowledging mistakes and avoid defensiveness; say, "I made a mistake."
- Acknowledge that there are people who hate other people, and that hateful actions can be threatening.

Share Your Perceptions

- Share your perceptions and feelings but try to avoid conveying hopelessness. Without diminishing the seriousness of a situation, it is important to keep perspective and convey it to children.
- Avoid giving young children more specific detail than necessary. Be careful not to frighten children. Limit children's exposure to media coverage of violent events.