



melmed center

# Calming Children's Fears

In response to the recent tragedy, the Melmed Center would like to offer the following advice on how to communicate with children and adolescents during times of crisis.

- 1. Keep control of the situation.**  
Given what they may have seen on television, children need to know that the violence is isolated to certain areas and they will not be harmed. We should try to assure our children often that we do everything we can to keep them safe and that we will be there for them. Stay together as a family as much as possible. Also, let children have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
- 2. Do not over explain the events.**  
Answer questions succinctly, then pause. If the child is satisfied with the explanation, move on to another topic and wait for the child to bring up the events again. This way we allow for ongoing child-centered conversation based on the child's need to know.
- 3. Allow the children to grieve losses.**  
Talk with children about how they're feeling and listen without judgment. Help them to use words that express their feelings, such as being happy, sad, angry, or mad. Encourage them to give or send pictures they have drawn or things they have written. Please note, if you yourself seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses even more strongly.
- 4. Overexposure to the media can be traumatizing.**  
It is unwise to let children or adolescents view footage of traumatic events over and over. Children and adolescents should not watch these events alone.
- 5. Make meaning of the events.**  
We as adults need to help our children and adolescents understand the significance of these events. Stress that the terrorist acts are ones of desperation and horror and that they're not about politics or religion. Children should know that lashing out at members of a particular religious or ethnic group will only cause more harm.
- 6. Help children regain faith in the future.**  
Help children develop plans for activities that will take place later- next week, next month, etc. Have children participate in the family's recovery activities. **Our response during this time will have a lasting impact.**
- 7. Encourage children to contribute through fund-raising activities.**  
Some ways children can help are by having bake sales, or setting up lemonade stands and donating money earned to The Red Cross. This will help decrease their fears and anxieties.

References include: the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the American Red Cross, and the medical doctors and psychologists at Melmed Center

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## **After a disaster, children are most afraid that . . .**

- The event will happen again
- someone will be injured or killed
- they will be separated from the family
- they will be left alone

## **Children** may exhibit the following behaviors after a disaster

- change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive
- change from being outgoing to shy and afraid
- the development of nighttime fears, bad dreams
- becoming easily upset, crying and whining
- loss trust in adults
- regression to younger behaviors
- not wanting parents out of their sight
- refusal to go to school or childcare
- becoming anxious due to interruptions in their daily routines
- symptoms of illness
- worry about the future.

## **Adolescents** might develop

- sleep disturbances, fatigue,
- lack of pleasure in activities enjoyed previously
- initiation of illicit substance abuse.

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