

## **Talking to Children About Terrorism and Armed Conflict**

**Judith A. Myers-Walls**

### **Abstract**

The events of September 11, 2001, provided a sudden and unsettling lesson on the impact of violent conflict on children for many parents and teachers. Although the attacks appear to have been confined to a limited number of places and lasted only a short time, people across the world felt and continue to feel threatened and vulnerable. Because of the number of people killed or injured that day, a very large number of people had direct connections with the death and destruction. Children were aware of the tragedy, so parents needed to respond. Research supports some approaches that are likely to be effective when talking with children about terrorism and armed conflict, although this topic needs additional research.

War is devastating to children. In the past decade, UNICEF has estimated that two million children have been killed in armed conflict. At least six million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled (UNICEF 1999). Although the impact on those children who live in war zones is most severe and damaging, there are consequences for children all over the world, whether they become aware of and concerned about the conflict or not (Myers-Walls 2001).

In a sad coincidence of events, a United Nations General Assembly session on children was planned for September 13, 2001. Seventy-five heads of state, a record number, were scheduled to attend that anticipated landmark event. Not surprisingly, the session needed to be canceled after the September 11 terrorist attacks so that New York could concentrate on “healing, not hosting.”

The events of September 11, 2001, provided a sudden and unsettling lesson on the impact of violent conflict on children for many parents and teachers. Although the attacks appear to have been confined to a limited number of places and lasted only a short time, people across the world felt and continue to feel threatened and vulnerable. Because of the number of people killed or injured that day, a very large number of people had direct connections with the death and destruction. Children were aware of the tragedy, so parents needed to respond. “Families are

extremely important systems and constitute the most important unit for post-disaster treatment and intervention efforts” (Norris et al. 2001b, 5). Yet, as a cartoonist once wrote, “War is never so ugly as when you explain it to children.” Adults could not pretend that the children did not know about this event, but they felt unprepared and, as one parent put it, “completely taken aback about how unequipped we are talk about this.”

After September 11, many organizations and individuals responded to the need for information for parents and teachers by using a wide variety of media. The concentration on children’s needs and reactions seems to be unprecedented and is probably linked to the immediacy of people’s exposure to the event due to mass media coverage and the fact that the attack was “at home.”

Research supports some approaches that are likely to be effective when talking with children about terrorism and armed conflict, although this topic needs additional research. It also is a topic closely tied to religious and political attitudes and to assumptions that may or may not be related to developmentally appropriate practice. Family life educators can play a valuable role in helping parents and teachers to understand their own reactions and attitudes, to support children at times of national trauma, and to build positive skills and attitudes for the future.

### **Help children deal with initial reactions**

Mass media make tragedies and disasters present and real almost everywhere around the world immediately after they occur. Some children watched the events of September 11 all day at school with no interpretation or explanation. Even children who had only minimal contact with the event had questions and were confused. This is true of children’s understanding of many wars and international conflicts (Myers-Bowman, Walker, and Myers-Walls 2000). Since September, children as young as 2½ have learned to connect planes with crashing into buildings, even if their parents thought those children had no exposure to the event.

There are special risks when entire families are traumatized. As one parent asked, “How do I explain it to the children when I don’t understand it myself?” This response seems to be consistent with responses of parents who feel vulnerable and under attack (Myers-Walls et al. 2000). A danger in those situations is that a cycle of silence can result. Children have a natural tendency to try to get back to routine and normal life as soon as possible. They look for something predictable and familiar. Children also may show delayed reactions to trauma. When they do either of those things, though, adults may interpret the reaction to mean that the children are not upset. When the adults are also traumatized, they are relieved that the children seem to be doing okay. They avoid bringing up the trauma. When the children are ready to talk, they see that the parents don’t want to talk about it. The result is that both parents and children do not deal adequately with their stress and trauma (Dyregrov 1992).

Because of the dangers of the cycle of silence, parents need to communicate to the children that they are willing to talk about the stressful event and about the family's reaction to it. It is not necessary to give a lecture or provide a long list of facts, but children need to know that they can talk to their parents or other supportive adults. They need to talk about feelings and begin to understand events. Misunderstandings can be problematic. Related to the events of September 2001, one five-year-old confused the words "hijacker" and "kayaker." The only way parents can deal with such misunderstandings is by listening to and talking with their children.

### **Reassure children, but be honest**

Terrorism is designed to make people afraid. Because children have limited information, skills, and experience, they are likely to feel especially afraid (Norris et al. 2001a, 2001b). Parents and other caring adults can help to reassure those children and reduce their fears. It is difficult to be reassuring when the adults are also feeling afraid, though. It might not be convincing to the children if the adults tell the children that nothing bad will happen. Parents who promise that nothing bad will happen also risk losing the children's trust and making them feel betrayed when those children learn that the parents cannot control all outcomes.

Adults can, however, reassure children that adults will do everything they can to keep the children safe. The adults can then describe the safety precautions they are taking. This is honest and realistic, and often this is the reassurance that children need. It also is appropriate to introduce religious beliefs at times like this. Beliefs about the meaning of life and death and about the presence of a higher being may be more meaningful at times of trauma.

### **Children have other emotions**

During times of trauma, children are often afraid, and it is appropriate to deal with those fears. Previous attempts to help children through times of trauma have often stopped there, however. Studies of children after the Persian Gulf War showed that children did have fears, but those studies also revealed other responses. After fears, the next most common reactions among a sample of children at that time were sadness and anger. The children were not only concerned about their own safety and well-being; they were also sad that other people were being killed and that children were losing parents. They were angry that some people had decided to fight instead of working out their problems (Myers-Walls 1991).

Adults should try to identify the feelings of children that go beyond fear for their own safety. Caring about the well-being of others is an important pro-social emotion related to the development of nurturing behavior. Adults can build on that emotion by helping children to explore ways that they can care for others.

It also is helpful if parents validate a wide range of feelings in their children, including uncomfortable ones. Parents may wish they could protect their children from fear, anger, and sadness, but such protection is both impossible and not helpful. Children benefit from learning that all emotions are legitimate and then learning positive ways to express those feelings. Parents who admit their own uncomfortable feelings can model for the children some positive methods for coping with those feelings. The better the parents learn to manage their own feelings, the better the children will cope (Norris et al. 2001c).

### **Take action with children**

People who feel helpless and out of control will feel stress more acutely than those who have a sense of self-efficacy (Norris et al. 2001c). After a stressful or traumatic event, it is helpful for both parents and children to take some kind of action to help to put their world back in order. For younger children, this may mean acting out the traumatic events through play and drawing pictures. For adolescents, writing letters to the editor of the paper or collecting funds for people in need may be helpful. Parents can help to guide children to an action that is appropriate for the child, the family's belief system, and the community.

It is important for parents to take action as well. Children who see their parents take action are likely to learn that there is hope and that it is possible to be optimistic about the future. Hope and optimism are powerful coping tools (Norris et al. 2001c). Seeing parents take action can also increase children's feelings of security and safety. In a practical sense, parents and children who take action are also making future human-caused traumas less likely.

### **Reduce violence in children's lives**

Being victims of violence can increase a person's sensitivity to other violent acts. Feelings of fear and threat impact lower levels of the brain, and continued exposure to those emotions can change the actual chemistry of the brain, making higher level thought less likely and more difficult (Perry 1997). Continued exposure to violence also carries the risk of re-traumatizing a child (Figley 2001).

Parents and teachers should monitor exposure to media and limit continual repetitions of the traumatic event in sound and pictures. They also should monitor play activities and toys. Activities that may have felt appropriate and neutral in the past may now be uncomfortable and stressful. Parents also should become aware of their own use of violence when interacting with children. Traumatized children will not benefit from harsh punishment. Harsh punishment also appeals to lower levels of the brain. Both parents and children will function better if they use reasoning, discussion, and problem-solving in their interactions with each other.

**Teach about peace**

Researchers have found that parents say more to their children about war than peace, and they use more action-oriented terms to do so (Myers-Walls, Myers-Bowman, and Pelo 1993). During times of international conflict and war, children are exposed to many violent methods for solving problems. Most parents would prefer that their children learn to use constructive, nonviolent methods. In order for them to learn those skills, parents need to increase their own knowledge of alternatives, expose children to nonviolent role models, and discuss alternative options when conflict occurs (Myers-Walls and Myers-Bowman 1999).

**Family life educators can help to build these skills**

All of the approaches listed above are skills that can be strengthened through effective family life education. Educators can help parents and teachers to monitor their own feelings and behaviors, to communicate effectively, to recognize children's reactions, to support children's emotional and intellectual development, to monitor children's play and media exposure, and to foster peacemaking skills. Family life educators can help parents, teachers, and children to minimize the trauma and maximize the positive learning experience.

**References**

Dyregrov, Atle. 1992. Work with traumatized children: Psychological effects and coping strategies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 5:5-17.

Figley, Charles. 2001. *The role of major life trauma in everyday life*. Presented at the Annual Council on Family Relations, Rochester, NY.

Myers-Bowman, Karen S., Kathleen Walker, and Judith A. Myers-Walls. 2000. "Children's reactions to international conflict: A cross-cultural analysis." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Minneapolis, Minn.

Myers-Walls, Judith A. 1991. "Parents, children, and the Persian Gulf war." Presented as part of the symposium "Operation Desert Storm: Impact on the Home Front" at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Denver, Colo.

Myers-Walls, Judith A., and Karen S. Myers-Bowman. 1999. Sorting through parenting education resources: Values and the example of socially conscious parenting. *Family Science Review* 12:69-86.

Myers-Walls, Judith A., Karen S. Myers-Bowman, Kathleen Walker, and Roshan Khosravi. 2000. "Passing on the peace: Parents and children describe war and peace." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Minneapolis, Minn.

Myers-Walls, Judith A. 2001. The parents' role in educating about war and peace. In Judith Myers-Walls, Péter Somlai, and Robert Rapoport (Eds.). *Families as educators for global citizenship*. Altershot: Ashgate.

Myers-Walls, Judith A., Karen S. Myers-Bowman, and Ann E. Pelo. 1993. Parents as educators about war and peace. *Family Relations* 42:66-73.

Norris, Fran H., Christopher M. Byrne, Eolia Diaz, and Krzysztof Kaniasty. 2001a. *The range, magnitude, and duration of effects of natural and human-caused disasters: A review of the empirical literature*.

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. (retrieved December 2001).

Norris, Fran H., Christopher M. Byrne, Eolia Diaz, and Krzysztof Kaniasty. 2001b. *Risk factors for adverse outcomes in natural and human-caused disasters: A review of the empirical literature*. National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. (retrieved December 2001).

Norris, Fran H., Christopher M. Byrne, Eolia Diaz, and Krzysztof Kaniasty. 2001c. *Psychosocial resources in the aftermath of natural and human-caused disasters: A review of the empirical literature, with implications for intervention*. National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. (retrieved December 2001).

Perry, Bruce. 1997. Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopmental factors in the "cycle of violence." In Joy D. Osofsky, ed. *Children in a violent society*. New York: Guilford.

UNICEF. 1999. *Children in conflict*. New York: UNICEF Staff Working Paper EPP-99-001.

### **Author**

Judith A. Myers-Walls, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, W. Lafayette, Indiana. [myerswal@cfs.purdue.edu](mailto:myerswal@cfs.purdue.edu).

**Cite this article:**

Myers-Wall, Judith. 2002. Talking to children about terrorism and armed conflict. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 7(1).