

Terrorism: Helping Our Children Cope

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In my last newsletter I shared some thoughts about the importance of connections with other people in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11. I was deeply touched by the number of people who e-mailed me in response to my article, reinforcing my belief that it is our relationship with others that serves as a reservoir of comfort, security, and hope, and a foundation for resilience.

Since I wrote my last newsletter I attended a meeting in New York City with staff at Sesame Workshop. Although the meeting was several miles from ground zero, I felt a small measure of reassurance as I sensed the ongoing vitality of a city that has experienced such unfathomable horror. Also, interacting with staff of Sesame Workshop, a group that is very dedicated to the welfare of children (in my October article I referenced their website as one containing useful information about helping youngsters deal with the aftermath of terrorism), initially contributed to a more positive tone to my first visit to Manhattan since September 11.

However, these positive moments were quickly tempered by a period of sadness as I was driven from New York to a speaking engagement in New Jersey. As we passed into New Jersey and I looked back at New York, I was not prepared for what I was to see. Although I had viewed countless photos and videos of the “new” skyline on television and in the press, it was very distressing to look in person at downtown New York and not observe the twin towers of the World Trade Center. This distress was intensified as I thought about the thousands of people who were killed on September 11 and as I met a number of individuals at my workshops in New York and New Jersey who had lost relatives and friends. Not surprisingly, many were still feeling a sense of shock and numbness, but I continued to hear about the vital significance of support from others during this very difficult period.

I have been asked many questions about speaking with children about terrorist acts. Initially these questions focused on the horrible events of September 11 but in the past couple of weeks they have concerned the reality of anthrax that has taken the lives of several people, hospitalized others, and closed post office buildings and congressional offices. In my

last two newsletters I listed several websites that contain useful information for parents, teachers, and other caregivers about assisting children with the anxieties associated with terrorism. In this article I should like to share what I consider to be three of the most important actions we can take to provide support for our children. Please refer to my previous articles for additional information.

1. Be Available to Your Children: Given all of the media coverage and stories, even young children are aware of the terrorist acts that have transpired and continue to occur. If you know that your children have questions about these acts do not hesitate to initiate a discussion with them. If your children appear not to wish to talk about these events, don't pressure them to do so but instead let them know you are available to discuss these events whenever they wish.

In any discussion, attempt to understand your child's perception of what has occurred. Obviously, their perception and your response will vary from one child to the next and will be dependent in great part on the age of the child and his or her cognitive level. Very young children will be more prone to relate the events to their immediate world such as worries of who will take care of them should something happen to their parents. However, given the magnitude of the September 11 destruction and loss of lives and the ongoing anthrax threat, even older children harbor some of the same concerns. For example, at one of my workshops a father who is employed by the government described his two teenagers asking if there was someone who is checking the mail at his workplace. He said to me, "While my kids attempt to use some humor such as asking me if I would like a pair of latex gloves and a gas mask for my upcoming birthday, it is obvious they are worried."

Being available to our children is not limited to discussions of the terrorist acts. At all times but especially during periods of stress, children need us to be more present in their lives—to play with them, to read to them, to be at their games, to watch TV with them, and with our young children to tuck them in at night. They need to feel that we love them and are there for them.

2. Be Realistically Reassuring but First Deal with Your Own Fears: Not surprisingly, national reports indicate the increased anxiety and

depression that have gripped adults since September 11. Many adults remain fearful of boarding an airplane or attending a meeting in a large hall or going into a skyscraper. If we are to be reassuring to our children we must find avenues to feel more comfortable ourselves and to return to a regular routine as soon as possible. As I noted in my last newsletter, we must rely on our connections to others for comfort. Speaking with our spouse, our friends, our relatives about our anxieties can lessen our worries. Just as we do not want our children to be alone with their worries and anger, we must ensure that we do not isolate ourselves from others.

What does it mean to be realistically reassuring? As you appreciate the nature of your children's concerns, be empathic and validating. Don't minimize or dismiss their feelings by saying, "We're fine, there's nothing to worry about." Instead validate what they have expressed. Share your own feelings of sadness or worry or anger but do so in a way in which your children don't feel that you are falling apart, since that will only serve to contribute to their sense of insecurity. You can let your children know that what happened is sad and that it does make people more worried. However, then you can add that people are doing all they can to make certain we are safe. You can point to a couple of concrete actions such as increased security at airports or particular buildings. As you talk, pay close attention to your children's questions to guide you in terms of how much to say and how to say it.

One mother commented that her six-year-old, first-grade son asked the same questions each day, most pertaining to how sad children must feel who lost parents at the World Trade Center or Pentagon and wondering who will take care of them. This mother recognized that while her son talked about the plight of these other youngsters, his words also contained the message, "Will something happen to you and dad and if it does who will take care of me?" She sensitively talked about the sadness of the children who lost loved ones and how the other parent or relatives would take care of the child. She then added, "Even if kids didn't have a parent die at the World Trade Center or at the Pentagon, they still worry that something might happen to their parents."

This remark served as an invitation for her son to voice his concerns about his parents being killed and what would happen to him. The mother could offer realistic reassurance that there was a "very, very small chance" of that occurring and that there would always be someone to

care for him. Since he continued to ask her the same questions repeatedly, she also learned that it takes time for children to process information, especially when strong emotions are aroused. As parents, we must be prepared to answer the same questions each day for many days in a patient, honest, and calm fashion. Doing so will help our children to feel a greater level of comfort and to be more willing to convey their feelings.

3. Provide Your Children with Opportunities to Help Others: As many of you know, I have lectured and written extensively on the importance of offering responsibilities to children through which they contribute to the well-being of others. I have emphasized that I believe there is an inborn need in children to want to help and when they do so it reinforces compassion, responsibility, and resilience.

It is very frightening to experience terrorist acts. Not only were the events of September 11 filled with profound sadness and horror but adding to the distress was the feeling that we had no control over what occurred. As Dr. Sam Goldstein and I have discussed in our work on resilience, one of the most important features of a resilient mindset is to focus on what we have some control over. While we had no control over the terrorist acts, most of us quickly sought actions over which we did have control. We displayed the flag, contributed money to relief funds, or gave blood. Children need the same opportunity to feel they are doing something worthwhile and one of the most effective ways is to engage them in acts of kindness.

I was impressed a day or two after September 11 to see a news report of elementary school children in New York who made sandwiches for the rescue workers. Others collected money for the families of victims or drew pictures of support. I read of others who made friendship bracelets "linking" them to children who had lost family members. More recently children have collected money for youngsters in Afghanistan at the suggestion of President Bush.

Each act of kindness reinforces in children the belief that they are making a difference, often easing some of their anxiety as they experience a sense of control and mastery. While we should not use these charitable acts as a way of avoiding or ignoring a child's sadness, we can use them in conjunction with easing the pain and stress that many youngsters are

experiencing. I should also note that when the entire family is involved in a charitable activity, it serves to strengthen the bonds of that family.

There are many uncertainties that we will face in the weeks, months, and even years ahead. I believe that as parents, teachers, and other caregivers we must fortify our own support systems so that we will be better equipped to assist children deal more successfully with their struggles and anxieties. Our ability to be available and accessible, to be realistically reassuring, and to find avenues through which our children can feel more in control, especially by contributing to others, will establish a foundation for resilience in ourselves and our children.

Before I end this newsletter, I again wish to thank the many of you who wrote to me in response to my last two articles. Your words served as important connections and I found them to be very supportive and comforting.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>