

# Discussing a terrorist attack with children

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There are times when teachers and parents may need to respond to unforeseen events, such as terrorist attacks. We hope that this guidance will be helpful. It based on guidance to teachers from the PSHE Association.

It is, of course, entirely up to parents as to how you respond with your own children – you will know what is best for you and your family.

As a school, we will always aim to respond thoughtfully and considerately to questions and discussions, and in a way which is appropriate to the age of the children.

## Introduction

When a terrorist attack occurs, children will hear about it in a number of different ways, some of which may be inaccurate, untrue, or based on rumour or speculation. Wherever they happen, events may create feelings of personal anxiety and fear that children can find hard to articulate. Giving them a context to discuss, question and express their thoughts and feelings will help them to process what has happened in a safe environment with a trusted adult.

This guidance is not intended as a script, but to help parents answer questions, structure discussion and, if appropriate, extend children's learning and understanding. Parents should pick out what they feel is relevant for the nature and circumstances of an event, the age and readiness of the children, and their family beliefs and values.

## Practical tips

### **Offer reassurance**

Children, especially younger ones, may be afraid that a similar attack will happen to them, or to their friends and family. It is important to reassure them from the outset of discussion that such attacks are very rare, and although it is possible, it is highly unlikely that something like this will happen to them, or to anyone they know.

### **Encourage questions and answer them honestly**

Younger children are naturally curious, and may be full of questions after hearing about a terrorist event. To ignore, dismiss, or not answer these questions, or to pretend that nothing has happened, can be counter-productive. It is important to answer children's questions honestly and in an age-appropriate way, in order to allay possible fears, but also to ensure that children are clear about separating basic facts about an event from speculation, rumour or untruths.

## **Clarify the facts**

When discussing a terrorist attack, the following three questions might be helpful:

What exactly has happened?

What is happening now?

How do we know?

It is important to help children separate the 'basic facts' that are known ('a bomb has exploded in a city'; 'people were injured/ killed') from inaccurate or speculative interpretations. Make sure you are clear of the difference between factual information, speculation and rumour in your responses to their questions (and to call out absolute untruths).

## **Allow children to talk about their feelings**

A terrorist attack can create a range of strong feelings within children, including curiosity, anxiety and fear, and even excitement. The feelings they have, and the strength of those feelings, can depend on many things, such as what they have seen or heard, from where or whom they got the information, or if they have some kind of connection – even an apparently tenuous one – to where the event took place or those involved or caught up in it.

The way that children show their feelings will also vary, with some being open about their emotions, and others appearing to ignore or 'block out' what has happened. It is important that the feelings children express are listened to and valued, but differing reactions should be respected, and appropriate 'space' offered to those who need it.

## **Encourage community togetherness**

Some children may express divisive feelings such as blame – not just of the perpetrator(s) of the terrorist act, but of the group or community from which they came, or on whose behalf they claimed to act. There may also be children who might be afraid of others' reactions towards them. It is vital to reassure all children that they are a valued and important part of the family, school and local community.

## **Further Guidance**

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/supporting-children-worried-about-terrorism/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-40011787>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/worries-about-the-world/>