

Talking to Children about the Bombings

The bombings in Boston evoke many emotions — shock, fear, anger, helplessness, anxiety, grief, and sadness. Children struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the bombings will turn to adults for comfort and answers. Children need to hear that their parents/caregivers will keep them safe.

- *Start the conversation.* Talk about the bombings with your child. Silence suggests that the event is too horrible even to speak about. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), most likely your children and teenagers have heard about this.
- *What does your child already know?* Ask what your child/teen has heard from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the bombing are known.
- *Gently correct inaccurate information.* If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to give the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.
- *Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.* Your child/teen may have difficult questions about the incident. She may ask if there will be more bombings; she is probably asking whether more bombings are “likely.” Parents and caregivers too will be concerned about a recurrence. If you can't answer all your child's questions, that's okay. Do reassure them they are safe and give any information you have on the help and support the victims are receiving. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.
- *Limit media exposure.* Limit your child's exposure to media images and sounds of the bombings, and *do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio bombing-related messages.* Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often hear what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of the bombings. If your children have been watching tv, take a minute to turn it off and ask about what they have seen. This gives you an opportunity to discuss the event and gently correct misperceptions.

- *Common reactions.* Children/Teens may react to this tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating. They may become more irritable or defiant. They may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It's common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. They may have trouble sleeping and lose or increase their appetites. In general, you should see these reactions decrease within a few weeks.

- *Be a positive role model.* Share your feelings about the bombings with your children, but at a level they can grasp. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims. You may share some worry; more importantly share ideas for coping with tragic events. This is a good time to review your family safety plan. Speak of the quick response by law enforcement and medical personnel to help the victims, so your child can see that the adults in the community are working hard to keep them safe.

- *Be patient.* In times of stress, children/teens may have changes in their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).

- *Extra help.* Should your children's reactions continue or at any point interfere with their ability to function, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

NOTE: Children/teens who were present or nearby the bombings, know anyone directly affected, or have experienced similar incidents will need more support in the days and weeks ahead.

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CHILDREN AND TRAUMA

Children respond to traumatic violence in a variety of ways; however there are several typical responses. These responses vary, depending on numerous factors, some of which are: the child's age, whether the child knew the individuals involved, and how 'graphic' the violence was. **Some common responses to trauma include:**

- Concerns about fearing that the person (people) suffered
- Repeatedly visualizing the crime/incident in their minds
- Constant attempts to tell and retell the story of the crime/incident
- Need to reenact the crime/incident through play
- A desire to seek revenge (for those who knew the victim(s))
- Feelings of guilt for not having intervened or prevented the crime

For some children, particularly those who knew the victim(s), signals of grief after a violent crime/incident include:

- Fear of death
- Fear of being left alone or sleeping alone
- A need to be with people who have been through the same experience
- Difficulty concentrating
- Drop in grades (during the school year)
- Physical complaints (headaches/stomachaches)
- Bed-wetting
- Nightmares
- Fear of sleep
- Clingy behavior (wanting to be with and around parents more often)

What you can do to help children who have witnessed violence:

- Allow your child to talk about what he/she experienced or heard about
- Know that younger children may prefer to "draw" about their experiences
- Ask them what they saw and heard and what they think about the experience. Help them to label feelings, and normalize their reactions ("that must have been pretty scary. It wouldn't surprise me if you keep thinking about it.")
- Spend some extra time with your child: have dinner together, make sure to keep bedtime routines.
- Remind your child of things he/she likes to do to help feel better when upset (playing, reading, etc.).
- Keep routines as much the same as possible in the aftermath of an unpleasant event. Children count on routines and structure.

If you have concerns that your child may be having serious responses to trauma, you should speak to a counselor.

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Talking with your Children About Traumatic Events

Here are some tips for talking with your children when they have witnessed or heard about traumatic events:

Listen to your children: Ask what have they heard about the traumatic event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions. Don't assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be while they are engaged in an activity: drawing, sitting on a swing, or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. For example a child may see a school shooting on television and assume it happened in his or her neighborhood not hundreds of miles away. Be truthful but don't tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the traumatic event, be clear that you will keep them safe and let them know adults (school, police, etc.) are working hard to make sure they will stay safe. School age children may be assured to know the shooter or persons responsible for this tragedy are dead or have been arrested and do not present a danger to your child or his or her school.

Pay attention to your reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the traumatic event your children will be more easily reassured.

Monitor your child's access to media: It will help if young children do not watch news reports or see the front page of the newspaper. Young children who watch a traumatic event on the TV news may think the event is still ongoing or happening again.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior they are still struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, insomnia or bed wetting. They may feel guilty that they are responsible for the event, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible.

Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities: mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc. reduces anxiety and helps children feel more in control.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and do not assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: For older children this traumatic event may lead to a discussion about ways they can help others who have experienced a tragedy. You can also ask them if they know how to keep themselves safe when they are away from home. Traumatic events make us feel like we have lost control so any constructive activities we engage in make us feel less vulnerable.