

Comforting Children in Times of Crisis

Across the USA, people of all ages are mourning the death and injury caused by the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. The mourners include young children. The extensive media coverage is bringing bloody images into the homes of young children, children who would traditionally be shielded from such graphic suffering.



After the Columbine school-shooting tragedy, the repeated news broadcasts had a stronger than expected impact on children's fear levels.

The questions raised by this new tragedy can harm or strengthen children, depending on how adults respond. In the next weeks and months, parents, Sunday school teachers, and pastors can help children find comfort and build Christian character in the midst of this tragedy.

Here are six suggestions for responding to young children who are trying to understand this recent tragedy.

1. **Expect different responses from different children.** Responses may range from tears and sadness, to fear or confusion, or to talk of how to get revenge or punish the bad men who hurt so many people. Some children may revert to thumb sucking or bedwetting. Others may not seem to be affected by the tragedy at all. Different personalities respond to the same event in different ways. Christian adults can begin to help a child by first observing how the child seems to be reacting to the crisis. Respond to the reaction of each individual child. If the child is sad, for example, but not scared, look for ways to comfort him without raising any fears.
2. **At first, acknowledge, accept, and, if appropriate, even share a child's emotional response.** For example, if you and a child are both feeling sad about all the people who were hurt or killed in the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and airplanes, it's OK to cry together. Romans 12:15 says, "Be sad with those who are sad" (International Children's Version). To hold a crying child and, perhaps, to cry with the child communicates that there are times when we can be genuinely sad together. You might say, "I'm feeling sad that so many were hurt. Are you sad too? Jesus feels sad about the hurting people too." Talking in this way puts into words what the preschool children are feeling in their hearts but perhaps don't know how to express. If a child is angry, you might say, "It's OK to feel angry when people hurt others. I believe God is angry too with the men who hurt so many people." If a child is reverting to younger behavior, you might say, "When bad things happen, sometimes it's hard to know what to do. God knows how you are feeling. Let's ask God to help you feel better." Watch the children's play and artwork for expressions of their feelings. If you see play or art that relates to the tragedy, ask what the play or art means. Listen carefully. Respond in some of the ways suggested on this sheet.
3. **Begin to share biblical insights into the tragedy.** During the Oklahoma City memorial service, Dr. Billy Graham said he took comfort in knowing that the children who died were taken straight into the arms of God. Share with children what is comforting to you. It may also help children to have you read aloud Christian picture books that deal with death or with heaven. Teach the children a Bible verse or two that can comfort them. (A few verses are included below.)
4. **Pray with children about the tragedy.** Encourage the children to pray in their own words. When they finish, or if they don't want to pray aloud, pray yourself. Using childlike words, tell God how you and the child feel. Ask God to help both of you find good ways to respond to bad events.
5. **Help the children find good responses.** Already, in New York City people have responded to the evil of the terrorists by donating blood to help the injured. Children you know may want to draw a picture, dictate a note, or choose a card to send to New York City, to Washington DC or to families of the air plane crashes. This kind of response helps everyone. The child who sends the message feels empowered to do good in the face of evil. Those who receive the message are comforted because someone shares their sense of loss. In the days ahead, listen for organized projects that children can participate in with adults.

6. **Help the children to enjoy everyday activities.** Some children may feel guilty about playing or returning to other activities they enjoy when the people in New York City and Washington DC are still hurting. You might say, "You have prayed for the people. You have talked about the losses. God will help all of us. Loving people in the cities are too. It's OK for you to play now."

During times of tragedy, God's Word can bring comfort and direction. A few short Bible verses are listed below. If you know a child who is experiencing one of the emotions listed on the left, help him memorize part or all of the matching verse listed on the right. In the next days and weeks, repeat the verse together to remind yourselves that God is in control.

Sadness: My peace I give you....So don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid. John 14:27.

Fear: Lord, keep us safe. Always protect us from such people. Psalm 12:7.

Worried: Give all your worries to him, because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7.

Anger: My friends, do not try to punish others when they wrong you. Wait for God to punish them with his anger. Romans 12:19.

Response to evil: Defeat evil by doing good. Romans 12:21.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4, NIV.

*All verses are taken from the International Children's Version for easier understanding by young children.

Submitted by Sharon Ellard, Early Childhood Specialist. Used with permission.