



CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS
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Range of emotional reactions...vary from no reaction to indifference to concern to worry and anxiety.

- Some children will make fun or play act. This is normal
- Your role will vary according to their needs.

Create safe environment where these discussions can occur—but don't force children to talk until they're ready

What children want/need:

- To know they're safe
- To know their parents are safe
- To know their needs will be met
- To know where to turn for comfort

Your role:

- You are a buffer, a protective shield, against unnecessary information, including media, conversations, disagreements.
- You are an interpreter of what children hear or experience outside the home
- You are the source of their security: answer their questions and concerns but avoid imposing blame/guilt on the victims

Tools for helping:

- Start with yourself: how anxious are you? Limit child's exposure to your anxiety (conversations demanding heightened security at school, for example, should NOT be done in earshot of your children)
- Do not transfer your fears to your child. While it's important to teach children safety measures, do not make them feel as if they're under constant threat of danger
- Keep adult conversations among the adults. Young children should not be exposed to adult discourse about (particular crisis) and its risks/consequences. Remember they LISTEN when you're on the phone!
- Keep everything consistent and predictable. Children need structure. Keep routines, including school.
- Limit TV and other media exposure—for you and your children!
- Acknowledge & validate their feelings
- Let children know how you're feeling. It both validates their feelings & may explain if you're upset, worried, inattentive so that they don't personalize it.



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- Assure them of everyone keeping them safe
- Don't force discussion. But if you feel child is worried, but not talking or denying it, make 'statement of assumption': What do you think other kids your age might be worrying about?
- Have faith in your child's ability to cope: they don't have same sense of history or future, so imagination won't take them to the same place. At same time:
 - Be prepared for short term regression: sleep; clinging; toileting
 - Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable. Watch for physical symptoms, provide extra support and attention. But don't change routines.

Things you shouldn't say or do:

1. Don't say "There's nothing to worry about."
2. Don't be surprised if children make light of or joke about deaths or injuries. Remember this is the age of computer games and graphic movies. OK to say "This isn't like the games you play or the movies you see" but they may or may not 'get it', depending upon ages
3. Don't make unrealistic promises, e.g. Promising that no one will get hurt, (DO assure them the you and caring adults around them will do everything possible to keep them—and yourselves—safe)
4. Don't have discussions about the war, deaths, disaster, crisis or terrorism in front of your young children. This includes talking on the phone while your children are present

Things you can say or do:

1. What have you been hearing about ..(the crisis/disaster)?
2. I'm going to sit with you while you're watching TV
3. I don't know what will happen, but I know we'll be able to handle it.
4. 'I understand how you could feel that way': Especially with older children: doesn't mean you agree, but communicates understanding, respects differences
5. DO know what's being said in and done in school

If your child is preoccupied with questions about the trauma/crisis, seek evaluation from qualified mental health professional.

Sally Weber was the Director of Jewish Community Programs and Special Needs Programs at Jewish Family Service Los Angeles. She was Coordinator of the JFSLA Crisis Response team, which included support to schools, synagogues and families related to shootings, traumatic deaths and natural disasters. She is currently a member of the Jewish Community Crisis Response Team of JFSLA.

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