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Helping Children Cope with A National Tragedy

The American Psychiatric Association has prepared the following suggestions to provide families with a starting point to talk with their children about the recent terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. These include:

- **It is likely that any child aware of the incident will be affected by it.** Very young children may appear frightened; others may seem sad, anxious or clingy. For this reason, helping your child grieve and discuss their reactions to the terrorist attacks is extremely important.
- **Feelings of anger, fear and anxiety are all normal and appropriate reactions** to tragic incidents. All children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and reactions to the tragic attacks.
- **Every child needs a way to express their fears and ask any questions they might have** about the incidents. If you are too distraught to speak with your children about the tragedy, ask someone close to you - or them - to talk to them.
- **Limit how much TV coverage your children watch about the tragedy.** Watching constant replays of the attacks can embed the incident in the minds of children.
- **Assure your children that they are safe.** Let them know that law enforcement are doing everything they can to prevent the attacks from recurring, and that proper security measures are being put in place to keep Americans safe.
- **When your children ask questions, answer them honestly,** and use words and concepts they can understand. It's OK to tell them there are some things that nobody can explain.
- **Some children may need specific explanations about the attack repeated several times.** Acknowledge that the fear of the unknown - who the attackers are, what happened to the victims, what happens to their families - can make children even more worried. Tell your children that organizations like the Red Cross, as well as local physicians and clergy, are doing everything they can to help the victims and their families.
- Young children may ask questions such as "Why did the pilots or God let this happen?" or "What will happen to the children of the people who were killed?" Older children, particularly adolescents, may be concerned about what's next. A plausible explanation might be "There are some people who do very bad things. They may be angry about something and think this is a good way to get attention."
- **Talk to your child's teacher and find out what the school plans in terms of discussion or support services.**
- If your children are having difficulty discussing their feelings, **encourage them to draw pictures or write about their feelings.** This can help reduce the level of fear and anxiety they might be experiencing.
- Help your child **resume a normal routine as quickly as possible.** Children will benefit from a sense of normalcy and stability, including familiar activities, people and places.
- While it is normal for a child to express feelings of anger, fear or sadness after a tragic incident, **if these feelings persist or worsen, consult a mental health professional.**
- Symptoms that should be watched are: **anxiety, sleep disturbances, excessive fears and social and/or academic problems.**

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