

Information:

Quite suddenly, a significant number of Catalan children, specially youngsters between 12 and 16 years old, have expressed fears and certain anxiety during the week of May 2, the night when Bin Laden was killed. They express an important fear that AlQaeda may perpetuate a massacre in our country and list a number of self cure guidelines such as not to use public transport, not to go to a crowded place, and so on. In the following document we offer a conceptual frame to understand those fears and some specific guidelines are included to help deal these children and adolescents with their fears.

Guidelines for the healthy and educational management of the situation of terrorist threat generated after the death of Bin Laden

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Different schools in Barcelona and Catalonia in general have consulted the UTCCB during the week after Bin Laden's death the night of May 2. The professionals of some educational centres and families had observed among children and mostly among adolescents in the Spanish Secondary Education an important concern about the possibility that AlQaeda may plan a terrorist attack in our country.

Specifically, they verbalized fear of travelling by underground, and, as on Tuesday, May 3 there was in Barcelona an important Champions match between Barça and Real Madrid, youngsters were really worried for the possibility that somebody may use explosives in the Barça stadium.

Initially, we were surprised by these fears from the UTCCB. We were not aware that a special alarm had been raised for the possible threat of an attack to take reprisals for the death of AlQaeda leader, and the mass media were much more worried about the veracity of the news and ethical aspects of the same than self protection measures. Eventually, we contacted our European colleagues and we knew that in their countries they had not detected (at least by Thursday, May 5) an increase in the fears and anxiety of their children and adolescents.

Then we reached the conclusion that Spanish children and young people may be more alert to the news about terrorism than other children and young people from central or northern Europe. This idea brought us the question about the reason for this sensibility or even hyper alert. Two hypotheses aroused:

- a) Spain has lived during these last 40 years the reality of several terrorist attacks perpetrated by ETA. For this reason, the possibility that attacks may occur and that the

self protection guidelines are given, such as avoid risks going into big department stores, football stadiums and sport events, may be part of the social collective memory, so that children and adolescents have heard about these security guidelines and they extrapolate them to the present situation.

- b) Spain, and specially the capital, Madrid, were the objective of one of the most important terrorist massacres in Europe: in 2004, on March 11, there were bombs in trains of the stations of Atocha, Pozo del Tío Raimundo and Santa Eugenia. These attacks were followed by an absolute consternation in the country, as well as a great deal of bloody images of the state of the trains and, even in some cases, the bodies of the victims. These images were broadcast once and again in the mass media, in written press, television and radio. Our youngsters between 12 and 16 years old today were between 5 and 9 years old, a too early age to be confronted with the information and the images of the attack.

In 2004, when the attacks of the 11-M took place, we were not as conscious as we are today as specialized professionals of the traumatizing effect that the continuous exposure to information, images and sounds related to a catastrophe may have on children between 4 and 10. At this age, children still have some difficulties to understand that what has happened, however terrible it can be, does not risk their own security or their families welfare. Because psychological assistance was in its initial state by then, little attention was put in assessing the information to which our children had been exposed and offering a conceptual frame through which they could understand the images of horror coming from the train attacks in Madrid.

Not having done research yet, from the UTCCB we consider that some of the fears that these days are showing our children and young people may be related to the traumatic memories of 11-M.

For this reason, we offer an excellent article by Dr. Robin F. Goodman, del **AHURI RMIT Research Centre** from Melbourne, Australia, published in Spanish and English at the NYU Child Study Centre. In this article, she offers specific guidelines to address the topic of terrorism to children at different ages, from preschool to adolescence and also deals with the topic of how to address the topic of terrorism from an ethical and educational perspective.

Reports of attacks in different places around the world may prompt questions among children about war and terrorism. Many questions parents have about terrorism, including how to explain terrorism to children, how much information to give, how to assess children's emotional reactions and how to provide comfort and a sense of safety are all discussed in a variety of articles below.

Introduction

Kids ask lots of tough questions but questions about acts of terrorism or war are some of the hardest to answer. Especially when the news provides immediate and graphic details, parents wonder if they should protect their children from the grim reality, explore the topic, or share their personal beliefs. Professionals may wonder how much information to provide or how to help children if they are confused or troubled. And all adults must reconcile the dilemma of advocating

non-violence while explaining terrorism and why nations maintain armies and engage in war. This guide helps answer some common questions and concerns parents and professionals have about talking to children about terrorism and war.

How do children react to news about war or terrorism?

Children's age and individual personality influence their reactions to stories they hear and images they see about violent acts in the newspapers and on television. With respect to age, preschool age children may be the most upset by the sights and sounds they see and hear. Children this age confuse facts with their fantasies and fear of danger. They can easily be overwhelmed. They do not yet have the ability to keep things in perspective and may be unable to block out troubling thoughts. School age children can certainly understand the difference between fantasy and reality but may have trouble keeping them separate at certain times. Therefore they may equate a scene from a scary movie with news footage and thus think that the news events are worse than they really are. They also may not realize a single incident is rebroadcast and so may think many more people are involved than is the case. In addition, the graphic and immediate nature of news make it seem as if the conflict is close to home - perhaps around the corner. Middle school and high school age children may be interested and intrigued by the politics of a situation and feel a need to take a stand or action. They may show a desire to be involved in political or charitable activities related to the violent acts.

In addition to age and maturity, children's personality style and [temperament](#) can influence their response. Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful and thus news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. Some children or teens may be more sensitive to, or knowledgeable about, the situation if they are the same nationality of those who are fighting. Children who know someone involved in the area of the acts may be especially affected by events.

Children and teens will also personalize the news they hear, relating it to events or issues in their own lives. Young children are usually most concerned about separation from parents, about good and bad, and fears of punishment. They may ask questions about the children they see on the news who are alone or bring up topics related to their own good and bad behavior. Middle school children are in the midst of peer struggles and are developing a mature moral outlook. Concerns about fairness and punishment will be more prevalent among this age group. Teens consider larger issues related to ethics, politics, and even their own involvement in a potential response through the armed services. Teenagers, like adults, may become reflective about life, re-examining their priorities and interests.

At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore, the suffering they see in the news. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports. Exposure to multiple forms of violence, such as video games, makes it more difficult to believe in, and understand the real human cost of tragedies. Parents and professionals should be on the lookout for children's extreme solutions based on what they have seen in movies. A macho or impulsive response is ill advised and should be put into the context of the real conflict.

How can I tell what a child is thinking or feeling about the terrorist act or war?

It is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about news they hear. Children may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not be aware of how they are being affected by the news. Parents can look for clues as to how their child is reacting. War play is not necessarily an indication of a problem. It is normal for children to play games related to war and

this may increase in response to current events as they actively work with the information, imitate, act out, or problem solve different scenarios. Regressive behaviors; when children engage in behaviors expected of a younger age child, overly aggressive or withdrawn behaviors, [nightmares](#) , or an obsession about violence may indicate extreme reactions needing closer attention.

Addressing a child's particular, personal fears is also necessary. Parents should not make assumptions about what worries their child. Parents are often surprised by a child's concerns, e.g. worrying about being shot while at Sunday school, or refusing to go on a boat ride after seeing a ship get attacked.

How should I talk to children about a terrorist act or war?

Contrary to parents' fears, talking about violent acts will not increase a child's fear. Having children keep scared feelings to themselves is more damaging than open discussion. As with other topics, consider the age and level of understanding of the child when entering into a discussion. Even children as young as 4 or 5 know about violent acts but all children may not know how to talk about their concerns. It is often necessary for parents to initiate the dialogue themselves. Asking children what they have heard or think is a good way to start. Parents should refrain from lecturing or teaching about the issues until there has been some exploration about what is most important, confusing, or troublesome to the child. Adults should look for opportunities as they arise, for example when watching the news together. You can also look for occasions to bring up the topic of when relevant related topics arise. For example, when people in a television show are arguing. Discussion about larger issues such as tolerance, difference , and non-violent problem solving can also be stimulated by news. Learning about a foreign culture or region also dispels myths and more accurately points out similarities and differences.

Far off violent events can stimulate a discussion of non-violent problem solving for problems closer to home. For instance helping children negotiate how to share toys or take turns in the baseball lineup demonstrates productive strategies for managing differences. Older children may understand the issues when related to a community arguing over a proposed shopping mall. Effective ways of working out these more personal situations can assist in explaining and examining the remote violent situations.

Adults should also respect a child's wish not to talk about particular issues until ready. Attending to nonverbal reactions, such as facial expression or posture, play behavior, verbal tone, or content of a child's expression offer important clues to a child's reactions and unspoken need to talk.

Answering questions and addressing fears does not necessarily happen all at once in one sit down session or one history lesson plan. New issues may arise or become apparent over time and thus discussion about war should be done on an ongoing and as needed basis.

Should I let a child watch television or read about terrorism or war?

Parents and professionals can assume the majority of children have access to information or hear about current events that are making the news. However, understanding the child's age and personality style determines how much direct access adults should provide. Watching, reading, or examining the news together is the best way to gauge a child's reaction and to help a child or teen deal with the information. In discussing what is viewed or heard when together, parents and professionals become informed about how the children processed the material and how they feel

about it. It also provides a ready forum for discussing the topic of war and violence. Correcting misinformation and discussing personal feelings is then more profitable.

Should I tell my child my opinion?

Terrorism and war provide a perfect opportunity to discuss the issues of prejudice, stereotyping and aggression and nonviolent ways to handle situations. Unfortunately it is easy to look for and assign blame, in part to make a situation understandable and feel it was preventable. Adults must monitor their own communications, being careful to avoid making generalizations about groups of individuals. This dehumanizes the situation. Open, honest discussion is recommended. But adults must be mindful of stating their opinions as fact or absolutes. Discussions should allow for disagreement and airing of different points of view. Feeling their opinion is wrong or misunderstood can cause children to disengage from dialogue or make them feel they are bad or stupid. In discussing how war or terrorism often stems from interpersonal conflict, misunderstanding, or differences in religion or culture, it is important to model tolerance. Accepting and understanding others' opinions is a necessary step in nonviolent conflict resolution.

Distinguishing between patriotism and opinion can be helpful. One can disagree with a cause or action but still believe in the right to have arms or feel it is important to defend a country. The manner in which issues are resolved is separate from one's allegiance or personal beliefs.

How can I reassure a child?

Don't dismiss a child's fears. Children can feel embarrassed or criticized when their fears are minimized. Exploring the issues and positive ways of coping help children master their fear and anxiety. Parents and professionals can reassure children with facts about how people are protected (for example, by police men in the community or the president who meets with world leaders) and individual safety measures that can be taken (for example, reinforcing the importance of talking to an adult when [bullied](#)). Avoiding "what if" fears by offering reliable, honest information is best. Maintaining routines and structure is also reassuring to children and helps normalize an event and restore a sense of safety.

What should I do if we know someone in the area of conflict or terrorism?

Having a personal relationship with someone in the area of conflict or target of terrorism can cause additional particularly troubling feelings. When a friend or relative is involved in a traumatic newsworthy event others often search for information. It is advisable to find the most reliable information source and filter out both the quantity and quality of the potentially inaccurate news provided to the general public. Having accurate information informs one of the best way to communicate with the person and the possibility of sending aid. Taking things one step at a time, being realistic about what is known rather than preparing for the worst can be difficult but helpful. Imagining the worst does not prevent it from happening and can turn an unpredictable situation into an unnecessarily bleak one. Obtaining support from others in a similar situation by sharing information or feelings helps some people feel less alone and validates their distressing feelings. Adults can share their fears but must manage their own distraught reactions so as not to scare their children or students. Engaging in some normal activities of life, especially for eating, sleeping, school and work provides stability and predictability at a time when events make life seem confusing.

Taking into account that in our case the children and youngsters that are reacting to the present threats from AlQaeda may have traumatic memories of the 11-M attacks, we suggest teachers and families that they complement Dr. Goodman's guidelines with questions about Madrid attempts.

To start talking with your children, you can ask them whether they have heard something about Bin Laden's death these days. If the answer is affirmative, but they express no fear to a terrorist attack, you should talk only about what terrorism is and, depending on the children's age, the legitimacy to kill other people, following Dr. Goodman's premises.

In the case that the children and youngster refer to images or memories related to the 11-M attacks, we will know the moment has come to talk about that and help them understand what happened, without generating panic to them. As Dr. Goodman says, and we completely agree, "contrary to what adults are afraid of, talking about acts of violence will not increase the fear in a child".

We are at your disposal for consultation or other considerations you may have at the free telephone number 900 10 15 80 and at info@utccb.net.