

Facing UP TO fear

When terror comes knocking, EQUIPPING children with the skills to COPE with the emotional SHOCKWAVES becomes paramount

WORDS by ELAINE HALLIGAN



The latest terrorist attack in Westminster has left many parents reeling from the sudden realisation that terrorist attacks are on our doorstep. One of my clients has a 14-year-old son, who was visiting Westminster at the time of the attack, and although he coped calmly with the situation during the incident, the emotional fallout came later as he saw how adults around him reacted. We are scared.

One of our main roles as a parent is to keep our children safe, and at the same time, we want to help them grow into healthy adults who are not overly anxious about life. Anxiety and mental health issues are on the increase, and as parents, the key to coping with life's knocks and ensuring resilience is having a healthy mindset.

We focus on teaching children how to swim when they're young

to ensure they have this life-saving skill. Similarly, when a terrorist attack occurs on our doorstep and we realise we can no longer reassure them that they will always be safe when they are with us, we have to teach them other skills to help them cope. The latest attack in Westminster has left many adults feeling anxious once again and it shakes our faith in human nature. How on Earth can our children process such an incident?

The truth is, children can easily and inadvertently be surrounded by fear and their reality can quickly become distorted. After the Madeleine McCann case in 2007, parents worried about their children being kidnapped. And various terrorist incidents around the world since 2001 have created more anxiety. These are traumatic events and can skew reality for us all, but here are seven top tips to help you manage the situation for your children.

1 The most important factor is to keep things in perspective and process our own emotions. Eighty per cent of parenting is modelling, so we need to stay calm and appreciate that the likelihood of our families being involved is statistically very small, and the chance is far greater of you being involved in a car incident. If you show hysteria and anxiety in the home, your child will pick up on this. If you are very anxious, of course speak to others and process your emotions first before addressing the children's worries.

2 Don't let your young children watch the TV news. The images can be very upsetting and some media will be reporting in a sensational way. Watching the coverage, live or not, can be akin to watching a horror movie and these images will be hard to remove from children's minds.

3 Keep things age appropriate. Toddlers and preschoolers don't need to be informed unless they ask. If your child is of primary school age, they will probably be hearing about it at school, so it's good to discuss it with them. Many of our clients were surprised to learn that their primary school children knew all about the Westminster attack due to their school discussing it in the assembly the following day. Calmly ask your child what they know and don't add to the list of horrific facts. If you can see that they are afraid, then admit this was a shocking thing to have happened and that it is natural to feel frightened at first. You don't want them to be assuming that people they see in the street are 'bad people' and you don't want them to be afraid to go to sleep, or to go out, or to be terrified of travelling, but if they are already feeling fearful, then talking about their fears will help more than telling them not to worry.

4 If they do ask questions, respond with a simple, clear explanation: "We don't know what was going on in this man's head to injure people as he did. It's likely he was not very well and his brain was not healthy. He didn't use his words to sort out whatever he was upset about. That's why it's very important to learn to talk about problems and not hurt anyone. What he did was not normal behaviour. That man is now dead and can't hurt anyone else." This is putting it into words that they can understand.

5 Children will respond differently to the event depending on their temperament. More sensitive children will feel things strongly and may struggle to process their feelings. You will need to be their emotion coach by helping them to understand their feelings – give them a name. Once a child knows his or her feelings are heard, they will feel more able to look for solutions. Taking action is empowering. You could say: "I can see you are really upset about this and worrying about some of the families who have lost loved ones. I am guessing it makes you feel sad. I have some ideas about how we could help if you would like to."

6 Research shows that feeling powerless to make things better causes people of all ages to feel hopeless, so talk to your child about perhaps lighting a candle and, if prayer is important to you, saying some prayers. A small contribution from their savings box to a funding page may also be helpful for them. Talk to them about how they can help people not to feel alienated and to choose extreme actions like this by always being inclusive and accepting differences.

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7 A worry box can be helpful if your child continues to be concerned about the incident. Your child can write the worry down and post it into a box so it is contained. They can post their worries every day if it helps, or leave the worries in there and take them out after a week to see if they have come to pass (if not, they can be torn up). Don't keep the worry box in the bedroom but in another space, so the night-time routine is not made toxic by worries.

Unfortunately, bad things do happen in life and the best gift we can give our children is to help them manage their worries. A major developmental milestone of childhood is assessing and managing risk, so in spite of the Westminster attack, we do still need to let go and allow our children to be kids, whilst giving them secure boundaries.

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