16 November, 2015

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT WAR AND TERRORISM

Dear Parent(s),

Like you, I was shocked to hear of the news of the devastating terrorist attacks which occurred in France over the weekend. Acts of such extreme violence and terror are impossible for us to reconcile, and my experience as both a parent and educator over many years suggests that they can leave our children feeling upset, anxious, confused and even unsafe.

Although very difficult, talking with our children about these issues is extremely important. Such conversations give us an opportunity to help our children feel more secure and understand the world they live in. I thought it might be helpful to write to you with some advice that might help your child process their feelings and respond to what they are seeing and hearing in the various news reports on television and in social media. I therefore trust that the following information is helpful to you and your family;

1. BE PREPARED TO LISTEN:

   • **Be prepared to create a time and place for child to ask their questions.** Sometimes more relaxed situations (like car trips) are good times to discuss such issues. Situations where you are not sitting “face to face” often help children to open up. However, it is important not to force children to talk about things until they’re ready.
   • **Remember that children tend to personalize situations.** For example, they may worry about the threat of war or acts of terror in their own life. In such situations it is important to reassure and support them. They may also obsess about friends or relatives who live overseas in places associated with incidents or events.
   • **Help children find ways to express themselves.** Some children may not be able to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures, playing with toys, or writing stories or poems directly or indirectly related to current events.

2. ANSWER YOUR CHILD’S QUESTIONS:

   • **Use words and concepts your child can understand.** It is important to make your explanations appropriate to your child’s age and level of understanding. Try to keep concepts as simple as possible and to avoid overloading your child with too much information.
   • **Give your child honest answers and information.** Again, keep information simple, and honest in a way they can understand. Remember that children will usually know if we are not being honest.
   • **Be prepared to repeat explanations or have several conversations.** Some information may be hard for your child to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may be your child’s way of asking for reassurance.
   • **Acknowledge and support your child’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions.** Let your child know that you think their questions and concerns are important. Be consistent and reassuring, but be careful to avoid making unrealistic promises.
   • **Avoid stereotyping groups of people by race, nationality, or religion.** Where appropriate, use the events to teach your child about understanding, tolerance, prejudice and stereotyping.
   • **Remember that children learn from watching their parents.** Your child will be deeply influenced by how you respond to events such as acts of violence and terrorism. They also learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
• **Let children know how you are feeling.** Your child will pick up on your own feelings about such events. Whilst it's ok for them to know to know that you are concerned, it is important not to burden them with your concerns.

• **Don't confront or challenge your child's way of handling events.** Children will respond to world events in a variety of different ways. If a child feels reassured by saying that things are happening very far away, it's usually best not to disagree. The child may need to think about events this way to feel safe.

3. **PROVIDE AS MUCH SUPPORT AS POSSIBLE:**

• **Be careful about what your child is watching on television or on social media.** Television news coverage of violent events, including war and terrorism, may be disturbing to children of all ages. Most news footage is composed of brief and vivid images; a flash of a building burning, the sound of gunfire, or of injured people in great distress. This kind of material can elicit fear and anxiety in children. I would advise great caution in allowing young children to watch news coverage of war and terrorism related events. If however, you decide to allow them to do so, you should watch it with them in order to answer questions, explain, and help your child process what they are seeing and hearing. Even news commentary can include wording or concepts that can be distressing for children.

• **Help children establish a predictable routine and schedule.** Children are reassured by structure and familiarity. School, sports, birthdays, holidays, and group activities take on added importance during stressful times.

• **Make sure you communicate with the school if you have concerns.** I strongly encourage you to discuss your concerns with your child's teacher(s). In this way we can work together to care for your child and we can keep you informed if issues arise at school.

• **Children who have experienced trauma or loss may show more intense reactions** to tragedies or news of war or terrorist incidents. These children may need extra support and attention. Again, please make sure you keep communication channels open between school and home. Speaking to a member of the school's counselling staff may be particularly helpful in such circumstances.

• **Watch for physical symptoms of stress.** Many children show anxiety and stress through complaints of physical aches and pains. Signs that a child may need professional help include: ongoing trouble sleeping, persistent upsetting thoughts, sudden onset of bedwetting, and trouble separating from their parents.

• **Help your child communicate with others and express how they are feeling.** Sometimes children may want to express their feelings by writing a letter to a politician, a local newspaper, or to a person affected by an act of terror or violence. This is a helpful and appropriate way for them to deal with their grief and/or feelings.

• **Let children be children.** Some children may be largely unaffected by events. They may not want to think or talk about them at all, and this is quite appropriate. If your child would rather play with a friend, climb a tree or ride their bike this may be their way of dealing with their own feelings.

4. **FOSTERING RESILIENCE**

• **Focus on the positives that can come from tragic situations.** It is often helpful to remind our children that when tragic events occur, people come together to support and encourage each other. We saw such demonstrations after the September 11 and Lindt Siege events. This can help children understand and appreciate the value of community.

• **Try to explain war in terms of providing safety and protection for people.** Providing simple explanations to younger children about soldiers providing safety and protection for our nation can be helpful. It is important to let children know that our government is taking action to protect our country against those who might threaten us.
• **Praying as a family for those in the armed services** and for those affected by war can also help children understand and reconcile their feelings.

• **Take time to stay connected.** During times of uncertainty children will appreciate extra efforts made by parents and other family members to stay and feel “connected”. Spending extra time together and giving hugs can be an invaluable way of showing our children that we love them, support them, and understand their feelings about these difficult issues.

War and terrorism are not easy for anyone, let alone children, to comprehend or accept. Therefore, quite understandably, some children may feel confused, upset, and anxious when confronted by the realities of war, terrorism and related world events. As parents we can help by listening and responding to our children in an honest, consistent, and supportive manner.

Most children, even when exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. Like most adults, they learn to deal with difficult times and go on with their lives. By creating an open environment where our children feel free to ask questions, we can help our children to better cope and respond to the realities of horrific world events such as war and terrorism.

Please be assured of our support in these difficult matters. If you have any issues of concern please don’t hesitate to speak with your child’s teacher(s) or one of our counselling staff.

Kind regards,

Geoffrey Fouracre

Headmaster

REFERENCES:

www.aacap.org/Talking-To-Children-About-Terrorism-And-War-087.aspx

www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/edu_materials/talk_children_about_war.pdf