HOW TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT THE TERROR ATTACKS IN PARIS.

Following the atrocities over the weekend in Paris, we offer the following article as a support to parents at this difficult time.

For all the parents asking themselves: ‘How do I protect my children from the news out of Paris?’.

The 24-hour news cycle means it will be difficult to shield your kids from absolutely everything.

If they don’t hear it on the radio, they might catch a glimpse on the TV. And even if you shut off all media, you can’t stop what they overhear from the adults around them – or the other kids at school.

**According to the Kids Helpline**
when children are frightened, their feelings will often show through nightmares, feeling sick, having trouble sleeping, being reluctant to go to school and worrying about things more than they normally would.

If you’re wondering how to talk to your kids about the terror attacks in France and how much you should tell them, here are some top tips via The Kids Helpline.

We know that disturbing and upsetting news viewed on television and through social media impacts negatively on children.

Every day we hear and see news coverage about events occurring either locally in Australia or internationally. The 24 hour news reporting cycle ensures we are kept up to date with the details of newsworthy events including graphic interviews with distressed victims, sad eye witnesses or intense commentators.

Our television and computer / tablet screens are filled with images such as vivid action pictures of sieges, hostages running for their lives with fear and terror on their faces, buildings being washed away in raging floodwaters, people’s homes engulfed in bushfires, or terrorists making demands in return for the lives of people they’ve captured. Numerous studies also show that general news stories can also negatively affect children.

We are constantly exposed to confronting images.

This hot topic looks at why parents need to manage their children’s exposure to news coverage especially the reporting of tragic events, what your child may experience if they are exposed, or over exposed to difficult news, why they are affected and what can be done to assist your child.

**What is the impact of disturbing news and how does it affect children and young people?**

Parents can expect their children to become more frightened by disturbing news as they age. Very young children do not always understand news especially the spoken news, and they do not understand the significance or the purpose of the news. Fictitious scary creatures can be more upsetting to them than the news because they are designed to be frightening. By preschool children tend to localise upsetting news events such as reports about natural disasters fearing that similar things might occur in their own family, home, street or suburb even though what they are viewing is happening elsewhere sometimes in another country.

Between the ages of 8 and 12 years children use their developing reasoning to manage their emotional responses especially in relation to concrete events such as fires or physical violence. By around 11 – 12 years of age their understanding of the difference between fantasy and reality has become clearer; they feel empathy for the people involved in crises being reported; and they are starting to realise that events have wider consequences, especially more abstract issues – such as terrorism, wars, or suffering.

Consequently an older child will be more frightened of a disturbing news items than a younger child. It is important to remember also that your child will have very different reactions to disturbing news than you the parent or carer.

One study of 380 teenagers revealed that 50% remembered being frightened by disturbing news as children and it seems that this is especially so if the report is personally meaningful and/or surprises or shocks them. Between 5% and 10% of children may carry their fright reaction through to adulthood. Children who tend to ruminate or “go over” things may have a stronger, longer lasting reaction. Children who are inclined to be anxious or children who have vivid imaginations may experience more shock or surprise and thus have a stronger fear reaction to news they are exposed to.

Research confirms that girls are inclined to report being frightened from watching news items more so than boys possibly due to girls in western societies being encouraged to express their feelings, emotions and vulnerabilities whilst boys are encouraged and “expected to behave more stoically”. Girls as a result tend to exhibit anxiety and have trouble sleeping, whilst boys are more likely to display irritation and frustration especially as they age when boys decline to admit their fear or fright (even though they are feeling fearful), and are less likely to seek out social support preferring to hide their responses. This can have an impact on their health.
Symptoms you may expect to see in children exposed to disturbing news include:

- night terrors
- sleep problems (not able to go to sleep, difficulty staying asleep or sleeping much longer than usual)
- headaches
- feeling sick
- reluctance to go to school
- difficulty concentrating in class
- irritable, angry or aggressive behaviour
- feeling tired or worrying about things more so than usual

Children may appear sad or scared, or they may say that they have no feelings (are numb) about an event, or use terms such as “It can’t be real” or “It’s not really happening”. These are all normal reactions and may last for a while. As a parent or carer it is important to let them know that you are there for a hug or a talk if they need it. If a tragic event has impacted your local community a parent or carer needs to manage their own anxiety and sadness first whilst maintaining the family’s routine and usual domestic arrangements to the extent possible. Consistency and routine contribute to a child’s sense of security and safety.

Why are children and young people affected by disturbing news?

Adults in their attempts to understand and keep abreast of an unfolding crisis can unwittingly expose their children over and over to tragic images as they access 24 hour news feeds and have social media coverage on the event. Repeated exposure to bad news and tragic events can leave children feeling anxious and upset. In some households the television is a constant background presence and news items that are flashed across the screen are accidentally viewed by children who are present. The media tends to show the most graphic aspects of an event in order to create compelling viewing for their audiences and a story depicted in colourful images will have more impact than the written account of the same incident that may appear in a newspaper. As mentioned, some children will be more susceptible to being negatively impacted and parents need to monitor these children when serious and disturbing items are being reported.

Things you can do – limit viewing

Take care when viewing news items that you are not exposing your child to disturbing coverage. Limiting viewing time is one way to control exposure to disturbing news and whilst parents cannot prevent unpleasant and disturbing events occurring, or their children from hearing or seeing reports, they can moderate their children’s exposure.

If your child is older be mindful that news can frighten this age group more so than younger age children. If possible, when a crisis or tragedy has occurred minimise the shock or surprise, by preparing your child through explaining it to them without embellishments beforehand, rather than have them hear or see it for the first time from a stranger through the media. This way you can talk with them about the facts in a calm un-sensationalised way, answer any questions they may have and offer reassurance that they live in a safe and secure environment.

Practical tips/ideas for managing:

- Welcome and invite questions from your child about news events and be curious about their thoughts and feelings in relation to the event.
- Be as accurate as you can be about news without being too simplistic, and avoid cultural stereotyping. Remind them that they live in a safe community and extreme events that are occurring elsewhere are not occurring here in their own street or suburb (if correct).
- Discuss their strengths and the ways they would respond themselves if some shocking event to occurred such as being offered a lift by a stranger or witnessing a road accident. Helping to prepare your child for possible surprises or shocking events will assist them to think more clearly should the event occur thus reducing the risk of emotional and/or physical harm.
- Give your child a chance to think of ways that they can be positive and helpful in their community such as organising their class to raise money for a scout hall that was damaged in floods.

Who can I contact for more information?

You may wish to contact your local parenting help service/s for further information.


If your child is feeling scared or vulnerable, they can contact the Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800.

We hope and pray for their safety.

Support is available for Australians with friends and family in Paris:

The Australian Embassy phone number in Paris is +331 4059 3300 for those trying to contact friends and family in the region.

24-HOUR CONSULAR EMERGENCY HELPLINE

Within Australia: 1300 555 135
Outside Australia: +61 2 6261 3305
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