

Talking to Children about the Bombings

The recent bombings evoke many emotions — shock, fear, anger, helplessness, anxiety, grief, and sadness. Children struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the bombings will turn to adults for comfort and answers. Children need to hear that their parents/caregivers will keep them safe.

- *Start the conversation.* Talk about the bombings with your child. Silence suggests that the event is too horrible even to speak about. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), most likely your children and teenagers have heard about this.
- *What does your child already know?* Ask what your child/teen has heard from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the bombing are known.
- *Gently correct inaccurate information.* If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to give the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.
- *Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.* Your child/teen may have difficult questions about the incident. She may ask if there will be more bombings; she is probably asking whether more bombings are “likely.” Parents and caregivers too will be concerned about a recurrence. If you can't answer all your child's questions, that's okay. Do reassure them they are safe and give any information you have on the help and support the victims are receiving. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.
- *Limit media exposure.* Limit your child's exposure to media images and sounds of the bombings, and *do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio bombing-related messages.* Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often hear what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of the bombings. If your children have been watching tv, take a minute to turn it off and ask about what they have seen. This gives you an opportunity to discuss the event and gently correct misperceptions.

- *Common reactions.* Children/Teens may react to this tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating. They may become more irritable or defiant. They may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It's common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. They may have trouble sleeping and lose or increase their appetites. In general, you should see these reactions decrease within a few weeks.

- *Be a positive role model.* Share your feelings about the bombings with your children, but at a level they can grasp. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims. You may share some worry; more importantly share ideas for coping with tragic events. This is a good time to review your family safety plan. Speak of the quick response by law enforcement and medical personnel to help the victims, so your child can see that the adults in the community are working hard to keep them safe.

- *Be patient.* In times of stress, children/teens may have changes in their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).

- *Extra help.* Should your children's reactions continue or at any point interfere with their ability to function, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

NOTE: Children/teens who were present or nearby the bombings, know anyone directly affected, or have experienced similar incidents will need more support in the days and weeks ahead.