

Helping Children Deal with a National Crisis

Here are some suggestions on how your church can help parents help children deal with a national crisis. These ideas can be put into a newsletter or bulletin or used for children's messages in worship. They are also helpful for Sunday school and weekday ministry staff.

Needs of children in a crisis

Love - They need to know your love—not showering with gifts—but physical affection.

Assurance - They need to have assurance of their own safety. But, avoid being overprotective so that they are afraid to leave your side.

Conversation - Keep the lines of communication open. Don't spend all your spare time glued to the television. Use such things as selecting pictures in a book or drawing pictures to express feelings. Then talk about the pictures. Take the lead from the child as to how much they need to talk about and know about the situation. Keep answers to questions simple, giving only what is needed. Listen to comments of children as they play—are there clues here that need further conversation?

Expression of feelings - Use opportunities for children to express feelings, such as with toys, puppets, books, music, water play, play dough, painting, and puzzles (creating order out of chaos). Let children know that you have some of the same feelings they have. Be honest about your feelings, but temper them with recognition that God loves even those who have harmed us. God doesn't like their actions, but God continues to love.

Prayer - Pray as a family. Pray for those injured, those whose family members were injured or killed, those who are making decisions, and also those who planned and carried out such an injustice. Keep prayers simple, simply talking to God. It's OK to tell God about your feelings too. Children may want to write out prayers as if writing a letter to God.

Assurance of God's love - They need to know that God loves with a happy heart and with a sad heart. Right now God is loving with a sad heart. We don't understand why this happened. We don't believe that this was what God wanted or planned to happen. We will never understand why it happened. But we do know that God is sad, not only sad for those whose families were killed, but also sad for the people who planned and carried out these acts. God wanted them to be happy people who loved others, but something went wrong.

Focus - Children need something aside from the crisis on which to focus their attention. This is a good time to carry out a mission project as a family. Suggest some local mission they may participate in or one of following:

- supply a meal for someone, bake something for someone
- call the blood bank to see if there is need for families to volunteer
- adopt a room or flower bed at church to work on
- visit a care center, taking your children and maybe some of their friends along with you
- plant a tree or care for the yard of some older person
- grow a garden and give food to others
- pray for a missionary or social service agency
- support a disaster relief agency

Reality testing - Children may have trouble distinguishing between TV shows where buildings are blown up and the factual news reports of an explosion. Yes, this really did happen. It is a sad time, but we will come through it with God's help.

Stability - There is something about the routine schedule that makes it settling. This can be an anchor to help the child realize that life can and will go on.

Quiet times - In the confusion the crisis, children and adults alike need quiet times.

Older Children

Older children can understand the concept of the three wills of God.

1. **God's Original Will** - that we choose to live together peacefully, loving and caring for each other.
2. **God's Circumstantial Will** - A part of that original will, however, is that we all have our own free will. We are free to choose things that will be helpful to others and things that will be hurtful to others. In these circumstances, some people chose to do things that were very hurtful to others.
3. **God's Ultimate Will** - If we allow God to work through us, we can become stronger people because of the circumstances that did happen, and we will have a stronger faith (or relationship with God) because we have lived through this.
(Adapted from *The Will of God* by Leslie Weatherhead. Abingdon, 1999, \$5.00)

Young Children

When talking about death with young children, play the game, "What's the Really, Really Me?" In this, touch a part of the child's body and say, "Is this the part of you that makes you cry when you are sad or makes you laugh when you are happy?" Then do the same with other parts of the body. Finally say, "That's the part that doesn't die when the body dies. We sometimes call this our soul."

Questions

Two main questions children are likely to have, whether they communicate those questions or not:

1. Will this happen to me or to someone I love? (We don't expect it to. You are always loved and have a loving circle of family and friends.)
2. Why does God make/allow this to happen? (We don't believe that God made this happen - see discussion of the will of God above.)

A young child cannot understand "We just have to trust in God." They trust in parents and parents protect them. Did the thousands who were killed not trust in God too?

If you remember any fears at the time of another national tragedy, share that you had fears then.

Realize that children may regress in their behavior to get our attention.

Resources

Thoughts on children and death can be found in Delia Halverson's book *How Do Our Children Grow?* published by Chalice Press and available through Cokesbury (www.cokesbury.com) as well as Amazon.com. This may be an appropriate time to have a study for parents on sharing faith with children. There is a study guide in this book.

Another book, *Hand in Hand Growing Spiritually With Our Children*, by Sue Downing has a chapter on "Walking the Valleys with our Children". Published by Discipleship Resources and available through Cokesbury or at www.discipleshipresources.org.

Go to www.cokesbury.com and click on curriculum. There you will find some options on free downloads about children and violence in schools. Much of that can be applicable here. There are also downloadable pieces for youth and for adults and violence. Also check out the FaithHome for Parents booklet, "Helping Your Child Cope with Violence". Go to www.cokesbury.com and do a search for FaithHome for Parents.

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