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Talking with Kids About Terrorism & School Safety

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When you are a mental health provider working with children, you are privy to the thoughts, fears, and anxieties of the kids with whom you work. Quite often kids do not express their anxiety about outside world events openly. These occurrences can seem complex and confusing. Kids often look to their parents and the other important adults in their lives to gauge how they should react or feel.

School safety is a particularly scary topic for children to talk about especially in light of the recent shootings. Due to digital media, kids today are more easily exposed to such news about the outside world. Quite often their parents are unaware of what and how often they view events and related images that may cause concern.

The best way for clinicians to evaluate the impact a particular event has on a child is by asking somewhat general and open-ended questions. If for example, a parent relates that they are unsure if their child is concerned or even aware of a recent event, the clinician should start by simply asking the child if he has anything in particular on his mind. If a parent is aware that their child is expressing concerns or fears about a recent event such as a school shooting or terrorist attack, a clinician can jump right into a conversation with the child. The first focus is on determining what the child knows about the event. Does he have an accurate account of what has happened? How does

he feel as a result of the event? Does he worry that he could fall victim to such an event?

It is also helpful to offer the facts. Although it may feel as if violent attacks are at an all time high the reality is that as reported by Bryan Schatz in *Mother Jones*, among many others, overall in comparison to the late 1970's-mid 1990's for example, terrorists attacks in Western Europe are comparably lower and less deadly. Sharing this information can help allay a child's fears. Because the digital world provides such easy access to information and images, children may have the false perception that violent attacks are a common event.

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The key to a successful and reassuring conversation about this sensitive topic is to take the developmental level of the individual child into account. It is also important to let the child lead the discussion. Such a conversation can be

quite cathartic, allowing the child to let go of and process his fears and anxieties.

It is also helpful to talk with parents about how to address these untoward events. When parents talk with children regularly about current events, the impact of any one event can be remediated. It is important to remind parents to consider their child's age and level of understanding.

Talking to kids about terrorism and school safety can be tough. Clinicians offer children a safe space to discuss, process, and understand their thoughts and feelings about these scary and unexpected events.

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