

**ANSWERING QUESTIONS  
ABOUT MILITARY  
ENGAGEMENT, WAR, HATE  
CRIMES, AND TERRORISM**



**Bright Horizons.**

Early Education & Preschool

**Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature; our spirituality; and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.**

Children need to understand that war is when countries or people fight over problems much harder to solve than the everyday problems among individuals. Terrorism is when a few people do terrible things to hurt a group of people or a whole country and use scare tactics to get their way.

Hate crimes and terrorism have many similarities and there is no consensus on the differences. In many ways, they are identical. A difference is that a hate crime is motivated by hate and terrorism usually has political or social objectives. The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”

Children are struggling with their own issues of how to resolve disputes peacefully. When they see adults using violence, it raises many questions. It contradicts everything we have taught them: “Use your words,” “Compromise,” “Don’t hit back,” “Fighting doesn’t solve anything,” or “Thou shall not kill.”

## **HOW DO WE ANSWER YOUNGER CHILDREN’S QUESTIONS ABOUT TERRORISM AND HATE CRIMES?**

For younger children, as Fred Rogers said, “There are some people in this world who are very angry and haven’t learned how to live with people they don’t agree with.” They come in all colors and live in different places. And sometimes they do terrible, awful things to hurt people. But there are many more people who know how to get along, and they are all over the world working hard to stop these people who do terrible things.

Children and adults need to understand that to avoid holding innocent people responsible for these attacks, we must remember that terrorists are individuals. Terrorists don’t come from any one place, culture, or religion. They are people who cause terror and use it as a weapon to instill fear and incite violence.

Terrorists are individuals and groups who represent only their own perspective, not any larger culture, religion, or community. Our anger, fear, and sense of powerlessness can sometimes cause us to feel and want to do senseless things — just like the terrorists

did. Sometimes, decisions are made to respond and this can often escalate into military involvement. Most times, especially in our own communities, talking together, learning about others, and thoughtful problem-solving can help avoid rash behavior that leads to more conflict.

Middle-schoolers and teens can understand that some terrorism is a political response and that the terrorists have specific issues with the United States' global presence. Other terrorists have hateful bias toward specific cultures. Teens may want to discuss issues they read about in social media or hear on the news. Even murderous attacks on civilians occur for various reasons. Two sides (and more) emerge, and older children may want to question your views. They may want to know why America is hated or discuss whether what we do is right or moral. Read credible online news sources or watch the news together and then discuss the issues. When you don't know an answer, tell the child that you will find out the answer, or research the issue together. With older children, respect the child's opinions, even when they are different from yours. Facilitate their developing worldviews and ensure they have the factual sources to learn more.

## **HOW DO WE ANSWER YOUNGER CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ABOUT WAR?**

Keep it simple: "Sometimes, whole countries, after much talking, still can't decide how to get along. They have militaries that fight each other. Our military is very strong and works hard to make sure that we are all safe."

## **HOW DO WE ANSWER OLDER CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ABOUT WAR, MILITARY ENGAGEMENT, RETALIATION, AND SEEKING JUSTICE?**

This is a very hard subject, because adults don't always agree. Help older children understand that going to war is very unusual. There are many disagreements throughout the world and people do fight and go to war over them, but it is almost always a last resort. Children will hear adults talking about punishing terrorists and getting revenge, either as a tactic or a right. Just saying words like "revenge," "retaliation," or "vengeance" can contribute to a cycle of violence and should be avoided.

"Seeking justice" communicates to children the intent to live in a just world. Probably the best we can do is to tell children in a manner appropriate for their developmental level that sometimes the only thing that most people think we can do to stop very bad people

or governments is to use military power. We can explain to children at their developmental level that we want them to learn how to live without violence and force, to use words, and to compromise. If all of us learned how to behave peacefully, no one would ever feel like fighting back. Discuss alternate solutions to war and conflict.

## **CHILDREN AND WAR PLAY**

Studies show that many children are fascinated with implements of action and power, particularly weapons. It is important to accept that many boys especially will be fascinated and drawn to warlike behavior: both attacking and defending. Children engage in this play to take risks, feel powerful (during a time when they have little power), work through fears, or feel like they're helping. For younger children, rather than quickly banishing or condemning warlike play, recognize that police cars, ambulances, rescue helicopters, planes, boats, cranes, and trucks are also equally dramatic implements of action and power that help and rescue.

For many older boys, more aggressive play and talk is likely, as well as an attraction to weapons and the people engaged in struggles. It is also likely that some children will be particularly fascinated with terrorists in the same way Jesse James, Blackbeard, the Luftwaffe, and other villains or enemies have intrigued children. The best reaction is to avoid expressing shock and horror. Instead, explain why you find nothing romantic or positive about terrorists, even in play. Make-believe violence is normal and can even be a healthy way of expressing emotion. But adults should encourage children to be a force for good in the world.

It is important not to shame children's exploration of violence through play and to remember that general statements like "guns are bad" can be confusing to children who have a parent who is in the military or is a police officer. Most of the time, they don't stop anyway, they just hide it. Setting safe boundaries is appropriate. "I notice you are playing police officers. I don't feel safe when you point pretend guns at me or other people. Can you find another way to play?"

## **WHAT DO WE TELL CHILDREN WHOSE LOVED ONES FACE MILITARY SERVICE?**

Again, children need honesty and reassurance appropriate for their developmental level. If a family member is in the military, we can say, "She (or he) has a job to do and is trained to do that job. We are all a little scared and will miss her a lot when she is gone — and she is really going to miss us, too." It can help involve the child in activities that keep the loved one safe and connected. "We will pray (or hold her in our thoughts) every day and write postcards to her, draw pictures for her, keep a journal, and make a

book of her letters. We can put markers on a map and trace her journeys.”

## **WHAT DO WE TELL TEENS CONCERNED ABOUT MILITARY SERVICE?**

Older teens may be concerned about the draft, military service, the moral issues of war, or their own capacity for bravery and sacrifice. They need an opportunity to talk about it. What opinions or guidance you share will, of course, depend on your politics. What teenagers need most from adults on this issue (and almost any issue) is an open ear and acceptance of their feelings and ideas. They need guidance rather than preaching. We need to help them arrive at the positions and courses of action that represent their emerging adulthood.

## **ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

At the core of most conflict, whether on the playground or between countries, are competing perspectives and values, and a lot of misunderstanding. Having a sense of curiosity about others and humility about oneself can minimize a lot of struggles. If only this was as easily done as said.

Teaching and modeling tolerance, respecting diversity, and seeking inclusion are important responses to these issues and help develop children who can resolve issues peacefully. Children can learn these skills from the beginning. Unfortunately, they can also learn prejudice at a very young age. They can learn to fear differences, stereotype people, and reject others because of gender, color, race, size, culture, or any of the characteristics that become the object of stereotypes, including poverty. (“Girls can’t do that,” “Those people are dirty,” “They talk funny and are stupid”). They learn this from the adults and children around them and from television, movies, music, and video games. They can develop negative attitudes about groups of people and apply them to individuals. Prejudice leads to scapegoating and discrimination.

Intolerance of others begins with ignorance and fear. Education is crucial to our attempts to create a more tolerant world. Children need to be taught about humanity, human rights, tolerance, the beauty of diversity, and how to be inclusive in order to combat images and stereotypes from the media and the world around them.

## **WHY DO PEOPLE HATE US/OUR COUNTRY?**

Children will express what they hear adults saying, giving us the opportunity to promote tolerance. If children express fear or antagonism toward a group of people, ask them to explain what they are thinking and feeling. At the child's developmental level, explain that although a few people from a group committed a terrible act, there are many, many more people from that same group who think hurting others is terrible and they do not hate America.

For older children, help them understand the differences between a political group with radical followers and whole peoples, countries, and religions. Explain that intolerance of others begins with ignorance and fear. This fear can be of other cultures, races, religions, or nations. We have every reason to be afraid of foreign terrorists (or domestic terrorists), but no reason to be afraid of whole cultures or religions.

Together, explore information about the group you are discussing. You may also come to understand better the issues and strategies that drive the radical terrorists and may develop a new view of the problems as well as solutions for the conflict. Tolerance and inclusion begin at home, and school and education are crucial to our attempts to create a more tolerant world. Educators and families can prevent dehumanization, prejudice, and stereotyping.

## **WHY DO PEOPLE WANT TO COME TO AMERICA?**

As the world becomes more globally connected and interdependent, immigration has become an increasingly larger and divisive issue. It is unfortunate that many human beings live in unsafe places, or have inconsistent access to food, water, and healthcare, or have a lack of access to jobs and high rates of poverty, or all the above. When people live in these conditions, it is no surprise that they seek opportunities to change their circumstances. Most who leave endure a lot of hardship on their journeys, with the hope of finding a healthier, safer place to live. But there is a lot of disagreement about what should be done in these situations.

Many welcome refugees to their countries regardless of how they come, some welcome only those who pursue legal means of entering the country, and others want to strictly limit immigration. In all these situations, a goal is to increase the safety and health and economic wellness of home countries. This is both a political and social issue. It is important to resist blaming unknown individuals or stereotyping groups of people. The vast majority of immigrants do not harm people or take away jobs from citizens. In fact, most studies show immigrants contribute to a society. Regardless of your personal opinion about immigration as a whole, the individuals involved are humans who are suffering.

For young children, you can talk about the immigration history of America and your own family's history. What country did your family come from? Why did they choose to immigrate to America? You can also learn more about other immigrants in your life. If children are exposed to the news, they may be worried about the possibility of families being separated. Assure them it will not happen to your family. And use it as an opportunity to build empathy for others.

Older children may want to talk about immigration and understand the difference between immigrants, migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers. They may have seen news reports of immigrants walking to America, of people getting hurt trying to enter America, or of family separation. Ask what they know and think and build your conversation from there. You can reach out to organizations that support refugees and offer support and get involved in positive change.

## **MORE ON HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE**

When crisis or catastrophe occurs, the most important work we can do after ensuring children's physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The family is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

If a child's family does not provide this safe haven, it is important that other adults in their lives do. Most children have at least one caring adult in their lives, but it is the job of all of us to ensure they never have less than one.

## **TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE**

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions:

- ▶ Will I be OK?
- ▶ Will you be OK?
- ▶ Will everyone I know and love be OK?
- ▶ Will the world that I know be OK?

Help the child:

Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child's lead. Ask the child what they wonder, what they think, what they imagine. Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the catastrophe will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, "We will be ready" (even if you are not feeling entirely sure yourself).

In the aftermath of a crisis or catastrophe, children will have a range of reactions. If they have been in harm's way or vulnerable, their wariness, fear, and anxiety will likely increase. If they have only heard about it, they may be curious and even seem cavalier in response. Alternately, they may feel empathy and sorrow for the people who are experiencing it. Some of their reaction depends on how the adults around them are responding.

Young children have limitations in how they can respond to and process emotions, and a spectrum of reactions is normal. The comforting, thoughtful presence of an adult helps dispel young children's fears. Older children also rely on the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism.

In these circumstances, children need to hear that:

- ▶ People are working very hard to learn more about early warnings of natural disasters or violent attacks and ways to prevent loss of life and damage to society.
- ▶ As a family or school community, we will devise plans to be prepared and safe.
- ▶ I am always here for you and will do everything I can to protect you.

## **ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS**

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is, "Bad things sometimes happen without a reason, but we will always do everything we can to protect ourselves so the chance of a bad thing happening is smaller." Use examples from your own life that they can understand, such as wearing a seat belt to protect themselves in case there is an accident or cutting up food in small bites to avoid choking. Children need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying or avoiding questions.



## Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

**Get your own feelings and thoughts straight.** Have another adult listen to you first if you aren't sure you are ready to talk to a child. Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for the inevitable difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live. Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it to come across. Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or indifference.

**Clarify.** Ask children what they think the words that they are using or hearing mean: death, drowning, loss, weather, disaster, hurricane, looter, hero, terrorist, victim, refugee. Understand what your child already knows and feel before beginning any dialogue by asking, "What are you thinking and feeling?"

**Observe.** Find natural opportunities to ask what's on the child's mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child's art, play, or conversations with friends. Accept his or her feelings. Read thoughtfully chosen picture books to support children's understanding.

**Check first before assuming either a lack of or strong interest.** When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts.

**Use emotional self-regulation.** Honestly share your feelings, but always try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.

**Be strong in a crisis even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry.** The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you. Demonstrate resilience and optimism.

**Offer physical comfort.** Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say "I'm here for you and we will make it through this."

**Adapt your response to a child's developmental level and needs.** While a young child may need to hear, "Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe," an older child may need to help you plan what to do or help research efforts to prevent natural disasters.

**Monitor and limit children's exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises.** Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart. The quantity and intensity of television, radio, and newspaper coverage, as well as adult conversations during a crisis, can easily frighten children, and adults should try to manage those images.

**Offer additional context.** Consider that natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis will spark an interest in environmental concerns as well as issues of poverty and race for older children. Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.

**Stay tuned in.** Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring children as their thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. The explanation of national, global, or personal events needs to match the child's developmental understanding and personality. Don't give more information than the child is ready for.

**Protect children's idealism.** Children are born idealists: The world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as our own. If children are exposed to too much of life's dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism and start to experience toxic stress.

**Stay alert to signs of stereotyping and racism.** In times of conflict or exposure to societal issues, "us versus them" mentalities, ethnic and social class stereotypes, and contempt for behaviors different from our own may lead to racism and cultural bias. In times of crisis, we can inadvertently make harmful assumptions about groups of people and make false correlations. Though often unintentional, this can cause damaging, lasting effects. More than ever, we need to teach children to accept and respect cultural and social groups different from theirs and see the good in other people. Children need us to model tolerance, respect for diversity, and an interest in learning about other people, cultures, and countries. In every conversation, work toward greater understanding across ethnic, cultural, and social class lines. Be your best as a human being.

**Honor children's need to have some control and find ways for them to contribute.** Our sense of power is restored by taking steps to improve our own current situation or to increase our preparedness for future situations. Finding ways to connect with others in the community and around the world to show our common humanity has the same result. Younger children can draw thank-you pictures for police officers and help pack a natural disaster survival kit. Older children may also want to help create a family emergency plan, communicate with a pen pal, or collect donations.

**Challenge assumptions and overgeneralizations.** Older children and teens are cultivating their worldviews. This matures over time, but is heavily influenced by their early experiences and by adult perspectives and opinions. Without a broad context, they readily and unconsciously integrate what they observe and hear. Help them develop a conscientious and curious approach to learning about the world by modeling these characteristics yourself, especially when it's hardest to do. For example, if a group of people from one country or religion commits a terror attack, it is important not to generalize that all from that country or religion are bad or evil.