



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
GREEK ORTHODOX LADIES PHILOPTOCHOS SOCIETY, INC.
126 East 37th Street • New York, NY 10016 • 212.977.7770 • www.philoptochos.org
Confidential Social Work Tel: 212.977.7782 • socialwork@philoptochos.org



National Philoptochos Department of Social Services

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENT EVENTS

All of us would like to protect our children from the effects of hearing about traumatic national and international events; however, the repeated images and reporting on television and internet postings often make it difficult to do so. To counter the impact of what children “hear and see” from outside sources, talk to them about these events to help them understand what happened, to help them verbalize and cope with their emotions in a healthy manner, and most importantly to make sure they know you will keep them safe.

“When I was a boy and would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me:
‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping’”. -Fred Rogers

TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN

- Talk to your children in age-appropriate language in a safe space where they feel secure, e.g., your home.
- Tell your children that these events were serious and not a game.
- While it may upset a child to talk about these events, it can be even more frightening if they believe they can’t talk to you about their concerns.
- Understand that for some children, especially younger ones, it may not be appropriate to “force the issue” if they are not aware of the events or if they do not appear especially concerned.
- Children may find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling, so start the conversation by asking what they are hearing in school and what their friends are saying.
- Let their questions guide how much information to provide.
- Listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don’t worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns, thoughts, and fantasies, answer their questions with simple, direct, and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support.
- At first, some older children may say they don’t want or need to discuss what happened. Don’t try to make them do so but keep an invitation open; watch for clues they want to talk (*i.e., hovering around while you do dishes or make dinner*).
- If children ask who is to blame, help them understand that it was committed by one bad person or a small group of bad people, and not by all people of a particular race, religion, or ethnic group.

REMAIN CALM

- When talking with your children, pay special attention to remaining calm yourself.
- Keep your own emotions, distress, and anxiety under control.

HELP CHILDREN FEEL SAFE AND SECURE

- Reassure your child that you are fine, safe and secure, that you always will be there to help them understand the emotions they are feeling and that you will do all in your power to keep them safe. Children need to know they are ‘connected’ with adults who care, so let them know that your family will be together during difficult times.
- Tell your child that their school officials and law enforcement agencies are taking actions to protect them and to ensure the safety of all of us.

MONITOR, DISCUSS AND RE-FRAME TV IMAGES

- Although parents can and should monitor the TV and internet images children watch, it is not always possible to do so. Be aware that children's viewing of recurring TV news coverage events can bring about distress and fear in them.
- Since children remember and experience troubling events differently, any of these reactions can be appropriate; however, if they become pronounced or of concern to you as a parent, seek help from your pediatrician or other trusted healthcare professional.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR YOUR CHLD

- If young children experience persistent bedwetting, continued fear of sleeping alone, night terrors, sadness or eating problems, professional help should be sought – ask your pediatrician for a referral.
- In older children, if schoolwork begins to suffer, or if a usually outgoing, friendly child becomes isolated or withdrawn, seek professional help – ask your pediatrician or your child’s school counselor for a referral.
- Some children are particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety if they have experienced prior trauma or loss, or if they already suffer from depression, anxiety, or other mental health needs. Seek professional help for them.

MONITOR YOUR OWN CONCERNS, CONVERSATIONS & REACTIONS

- If we voice our concerns to our children, we may be raising new worries on the child's part.
 - Children need to feel that someone is in control and knows what to do.
 - With older children, but only after we have listened to their concerns and drawn them out about their questions and concerns, it may be appropriate to communicate our concerns.
- Since adults have differing views and opinions about many different issues, make sure that any disagreements you have with other adults about the event- at-hand are not discussed in front of children.

MAINTAIN A NORMAL ROUTINE

- An effective and reassuring way to let children know that all of you are safe and secure is maintaining your normal routines and keeping your regular schedules.
 - Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise.
 - Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

DEVELOP A FAMILY EMERGENCY PLAN

- Develop and periodically review family emergency plans such as how to contact each other, where to meet should something happen, and which adults they can go to if you are not available.
- Familiarize yourselves with your child's school preparations and plans for emergency situations and other events.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC EVENTS AS ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

DOES GOD ALLOW SIN?

- In the mystery of God's plan of creation and salvation which foreknows everything that happens without predetermining our freewill choices, all forms of sin are allowed. This is why the Crucifixion represents the ultimate way in which God provides healing grace: unconditional love that heals violence blaming, shaming, sin.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN?

- Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, wildfires, hurricanes etc., are not "acts of God."
- Person-initiated traumatic events such as war, mass shootings of innocent people are not "God's will."
 - God does not act to hurt or damage. It is not God's will for tragedy to occur.
 - These so-called acts of God are acts of a fallen world - an imperfect world.
 - All that can be said with certainty about God's will is written in I Timothy 2:4 and read at every Baptism:
 - "God's will is that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of truth."
 - God's will is to save, not harm.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW WAR WHEN IT IS AGAINST THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TO KILL?

- God does not cause wars - only people do who give in to their anger and fear.
- Because we are created with freewill - the freedom to make our own decisions since God did not want to force us to love Him - God allows war for the same reason He allows bad things to happen: He respects our choice to fight each other, even though He is very sorrowful about this.

DOES GOD PUNISH SOLDIERS WHO KILL OTHERS DURING A WAR?

What about those who kill in self-defense or protecting the innocent?

- Killing someone is never ok. The only One who may take away life is the same person who gives life: God.
- Taking someone's life in self-defense or protecting the innocent may be viewed, by some, as reasonable; however, it is both sinful and wrong and a moral dilemma that cannot remove the stain of killing.
- Soldiers returning from war who killed or harmed enemies, who killed in self-defense or to protect the innocent need to embark on a process of healing to ensure the act of killing does not permanently damage their soul.
 - This process is articulated in the ancient canons that require a period of penance - best understood as divine therapy for healing and forgiveness.

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