

Helping Children Cope with Terrorism and Crisis

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As crisis events play out in the media, there may be an increase in the anxiety level and apprehensions of both adults and children. For many children, the guidance of caring adults will not only help reduce their stress but help them develop lifelong emotional and psychological coping skills.

Understanding the Feelings and Attitudes of Your Staff

Children often learn fears and coping skills by observing adults. Before camp staff can be role models and provide a caring environment, they must first examine their own behaviors and attitudes toward war, terrorism, and diversity. International and American staff may have very different reactions to current events. Camp directors should be clear about expectations for staff behavior and discussions that should or should not happen in front of children.

- **Current events:** Although it is important that staff and campers are kept informed about current developments during the summer, who determines what information is shared and how?
- **Anti-war or pro-war beliefs:** Staff members have personal beliefs that may be different from campers or their parents. Staff may have adamant political beliefs, beliefs about support of troops, war as an act of violence, humanitarian treatment or relief efforts, or whether the United States should have initiated action with or without international support. As a part of a democratic society, we recognize people have different beliefs and have the right to express those beliefs in an appropriate manner. How are questions from campers about these beliefs to be handled in the camp setting?
- **Personal fears:** Although it is natural for everyone to feel fear during turbulent times, how are those fears appropriately expressed in camp? What about fears for the safety of their own families and friends? Young adult staff may have fears of a draft being reinstated or receive letters from personal friends currently deployed in Iraq. How will their fears be acknowledged, and do they need opportunities to discuss their anxieties with friends or professional or spiritual counselors?
- **Diversity and tolerance issues:** How will expressions of discrimination or harassment be handled? What are campers and staff teaching each other about ethnic populations? Are there specific racial or religious stereotypes being discussed? How is compassion for other people's feelings demonstrated?
- **Attitudes of anger, hatred, or violence:** Be on the lookout for signs of anxiety in your staff. One of the common reactions is excessive worry and anger. How will expressions of anger and intolerance be handled? Expect more irritability and conflicts and plan for quicker resolutions.

Understanding the Feelings and Behaviors of Your Campers

Many children will display some signs of stress. Staff members need to understand that campers may be experiencing a variety of reactions and feelings in response to war or acts of terrorism. Some of these are normal reactions to uncertainty.

- **Fear:** Campers may fear for the safety of those in the military and for their own safety.
- **Loss of control:** A feeling of lack of control may be overwhelming and confusing. They may react by trying to exert more control over those things they can control.
- **Anger:** Anger is a natural reaction. Children may direct their anger toward their own parents, other children, or persons who are opposed to war.
- **Loss of stability:** Normal family routines are interrupted. Camp can be an important respite for changes in their usual schedules.
- **Isolation and separation anxiety:** Children with family members who are in the military or reserves may feel isolated. They may be staying with one parent or with relatives while their parents are gone. While camp may seem a helpful alternative, the child may feel more isolated and separated.

- *Confusion*: Children may be confused and have trouble separating reality from the violence they see daily on television or in the movies.

Acknowledging Feelings and Helping Campers Feel Safe

It is difficult in today's world to face the challenges of explaining violence, war, and terrorism to children. Staff should be alert to changes in behavior and the emotional responses that might indicate distress and respond to them in a developmentally-appropriate manner. Camps should provide opportunities for children who are asking questions or experiencing signs of distress to discuss their concerns and fears. Although difficult, having these conversations and responding to changes in behavior are extremely important.

Talking with Children

Staff should receive guidance in how to answer questions and discuss these issues with their campers. Through careful discussion, staff can help campers separate real from imagined fears and help restore a sense of security and safety. They can help campers develop the skills they need to feel resilient, rather than powerless. It is important for staff to:

- Remain calm, be reassuring, and listen to campers.
- Acknowledge children's thoughts, feelings, and fears. Strive to recognize the personal feelings behind the child's actions and acknowledge them: "I know you are concerned about your mom being so far away." Be consistent and reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises about what will or will not happen.
- Create an appropriate time to discuss questions or behaviors. Be sure there is enough time to add closure to a discussion before children have to run off to an activity. Although bedtime is not a good time to initiate a discussion, it might be the time when children have the need to talk. Be sure to transition into more calming subjects or activities before going to sleep.
- Understand how to make the discussion age-appropriate and not overload children with too much information.
- Children often personalize situations. Assure them they are cared for and that actions are taken to assure their safety.
- Understand campers' need for contact with their parents, and help facilitate communications with them according to the procedures established by the camp.
- Avoid stereotyping groups of people by race, religion, or nationality. Use opportunities to teach cultural differences, tolerance, and explain prejudice.
- Do not force children to be a part of a discussion if they are not interested or don't want to talk about it.
- Be prepared to acknowledge concerns. This is a really difficult time for everyone. It is OK for them to know you are worried about events. It is also OK for staff to ask for help if they are uncomfortable talking with children about these issues.
- Remember that children learn from watching how adults react to situations and, at camp, they often idolize staff and listen to conversations staff members have with each other.

Responding to Changes in Behavior

During times of stress, structure and consistent expectations for behavior are important. The following is a list of ideas for discussion with staff about some expected behavioral changes and ideas for responding to them.

- Campers who are at camp for the first time often feel some separation anxiety. If the normal procedures for dealing with homesickness are not effective, additional attention and/or more information about the child's specific situation or fears may be needed.
- Children may have more problems at bedtime. Discussions about war or terrorism should not happen just before going to bed. Consider whether night-lights, stories, music, or other ways to provide comfort to children as they fall asleep should be a part of a regular routine.
- Children may pretend to act out "war," blow things up, or include images of violence in their artwork. This is a normal way children express their awareness of events around them. However, it may be very upsetting to some children. Try to get them involved in camp activities or guide their actions toward role playing policemen, firemen,

or emergency personnel who provide help to save lives. Children who are very obsessed with violent thoughts may need professional help.

- Some children may withdraw or become aggressive. If the behavior continues or if there are signs of severe stress — such as talk of suicide or destructive behaviors — it should be taken seriously and professional help should be sought immediately.

Partner with Parents

It is important for your camp to partner with parents and provide a sense of collective security between home and camp. Find out as a part of the screening process if the child has reason to be more vulnerable to stress or if she or he has been expressing concerns or fears or changes in behavior. Encourage parents to share the strategies they have used to help their child feel more safe and secure and what their expectations are for communication with them while the child is at camp.

Remember, opportunities for children to get away from the anxieties of these difficult times revealed daily in the media and to participate in a supportive, fun-filled community are needed more than ever. With thought and preparation, camps are uniquely positioned to meet the challenge and provide these opportunities.

Resources

Talking With Children — Links to Other Web Sites:

- [Open Letter to Parents from First Lady Michelle Obama](#) (January 2011):
- [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#)
- [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](#) (PDF)

Resources for Responding to Changes in Behavior

- [New York State Office of Mental Health](#)

American Camp Association

- [Crisis Response Resources](#)