

## **The Recent Tragedy in Southern Russia Thoughts for Parents**

None of us want our children to have to grow up in a world with threatening or terrifying events. The television coverage of the recent events in the school in southern Russia tends to either make us more anxious about the potential that this could happen here in the U.S., or it makes us more jaded or shut down in our thinking.

Probably the biggest mistake that we make as parents is to assume that, if our child isn't bringing something up, it must be because they aren't worried about it or don't know about it. What is true, however, is that children take their cues from us and often harbor their own fears quietly, thinking that they shouldn't bring it up, because in the past they've seen our discomfort when their issues need something bigger than just our reassurance. When we feel powerless and helpless, our children feel that way as well. If, however, they can bring up their fears and we are not afraid to talk with them about those fears, they feel confident that, no matter how bad things get, they won't be facing it alone. In other words, it is more important to allow them to speak about their fears and find us open and understanding than it is for us to have an answer that tries to take those fears away.

We do know that television coverage leaves children much, much more vulnerable to nightmares and vivid fears than simply hearing about frightening things from parents or loved ones. We can reason through things when people talk with us, but there is no way to remove a terrifying image from our brains once we've been exposed to it on television or video.

Many parents will want to bring up this event in order to be sure that their children know that they are willing to talk about it. Others will not. Some of that will vary by the age of the child, and your knowledge of his or her exposure to the event via news coverage. Here are some suggestions, no matter where you are along those lines.

Often we say something like, "That was a frightening thing that happened in the school in Russia. I wondered whether you're worried that this could happen here." When we are that direct with children, they often want to reassure us that they aren't worried, so many will reply that they aren't worried. And in many cases, that gives us a false sense of reassurance.

We can have more success when we have a relationship on an everyday basis that includes asking our children what troubles them. Next time you hear yourself ask, "How was school today?", follow that up with, "What do your teachers do that you really appreciate?" or a couple of other questions that let them reflect more thoughtfully on their school experience, and move into, "What kinds of things do you think your friends worry about?" That gives your child a graceful way to bring up events that are troubling without actually having to say that they are personally worried about it. It gives them a little cushion, or a little distance for safety. Many parents talk about how little our children talk to them, but a contributing factor to that is how narrow their questions often are. Other questions to help your children talk with you more deeply on a daily basis might include:

- What do you wish adults understood about what it is like to be a kid today?
- If you could grow up to change one thing that is really important in the world, what would that be?
- What is the nicest thing anybody ever did for you?
- What is one thing I could do that would make a difference for you in your life?

And then, be sure to tell your child the things they do that you appreciate – the things you've learned by being a parent – and how much they enrich your life.

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### Thoughts for Parents

When really overwhelming events happen, sometimes we're not sure whether talking about them with our kids will make them worry more or help them feel confident. Here are some thoughts and ideas.

- Often we don't bring things up because we want to protect our children's innocence.
- Children "read" us well, so they don't bring things up they think we want to avoid discussing.
- Children harbor fears in silence and often feel very alone in their anxiety.
- There are ways we ask questions that help kids open up and ways we close them down.

If you can't decide whether to bring it up directly, consider language such as this:

- **Sometimes when we go to bed at night and the world is kind of quiet, we lie in bed and think about things. What kinds of things do you think about?** (*Don't lead them into any particular realm – don't coach them to think about worries vs. celebrations. Just let them talk.*)
- **Sometimes I wonder what you think kids at school worry about. What do you think troubles kids your age?** (*By asking it in this way, your child doesn't have to admit that s/he is worried about any particular thing, and sometimes it feels safer to put it out as though it is someone else's worry, not his or her own.*)
- **What do you wish adults understood about what it is like to be a kid these days?** (*This allows your child to tell you things they wish you understood without having to seem like they're saying that you don't listen or aren't understanding. It is nice, in that it makes the assumption that there are things that kids wish adults understood, and the further assumption that you'd like to learn about that. Don't blow it by reacting or responding. Follow up with "Tell me more about that." Or, "Which of your friends' parents understand you kids the best?" Or, "How do you know which teachers really care about kids?"*)
- **What kinds of things do you see happening in the world that your generation has to deal with that maybe my generation didn't?** (*The goal here is not to reiterate how yes, you did have to worry about those things or other things, but to give your child the chance to voice to you the things s/he is worried about. Just LISTEN!*)

Reassurances, if your child brings up the event in Russia, might include:

- **In this case, the terrorists were from the same country as the people at the school. They aren't people who have any anger at us in America.** Notice we're not saying it could never happen here, but specific to this event, it probably isn't a threat to us here.
- **Smart people in our government are working to keep us safe.** Point out that they actually have done very well at keeping terrorist attacks at bay for almost three years, which truly is remarkable. But we can't say to our children that it won't happen again in the US.
- **People in schools have worked very hard to make good plans on how to keep kids safe.** We have all kinds of safe school initiatives that are making a difference. And we need to continue to be pro-active and vigilant.

Try never to end your conversation with your reassurance to your child. Always make a comment that leaves the door open for you to learn more from your child about their perceptions, fears and needs. Leave them with the message that, "We're in this together. Always!"