

The Parent's Notebook

DADDY, I'M AFRAID!

With the nation's current preoccupation with terrorism, the economy, and wars in the Middle East as evidenced by the 24/7 news coverage on radio and television, many children experience a heightened level of anxiety. Other factors such as weather, bullying at school, divorce, loss of a loved one or pet, etc. may also contribute to elevated anxiety levels in children. Compared to adults and older children, young children have more difficulty separating reality from fantasy, have a less developed sense of time and distance, and are more likely to mentally magnify the threats to themselves, family members, or friends. They may become generally more anxious, worry, seem clingy, have difficulty separating from parents or caretakers, show more fears at night, exhibit physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches), and voice concerns about safety. Older children may show some of these same features, may also seem preoccupied or distracted, appear withdrawn, and display declining performance at school. The following are a few tips parents may wish to consider during these difficult times can assist in easing the fears of the anxious youngster:



- The younger the child, the more they should be protected or shielded from television news coverage, radio talk shows, and adult conversations about terroristic activities, violence, and war events.
- Older children should have only a limited, carefully screened diet of this same information and exposure to graphic images.
- Assist your children to express their feelings through talking, art, and play.
- Provide a lot of reassurance to your children about their relative safety and your ability to protect them. Also educate them about the role of the military in defending the country, the distances involved between them and what they have seen or heard, ways of dealing with bullies or weather events, etc.
- Keep schedules and routines as much the same as possible.
- Hug them often and even pick them up to reinforce their view of you as a source of safety, protection, and security. Nightlights, soft background music, prayers, and cuddly animals or dolls may soothe nighttime fears. Baths, reading time, and calm, quiet activities immediately before bedtime also may help with bedtime transitions.
- Be genuine about your own anxiety, but model confidence and effective coping skills. After all, your children are closely watching you for cues about how to behave and for solutions.
- Avoid calling children names (e.g., baby, sissy), shaming them, or punishing these behaviors under these circumstances. Children tend to regress under stress.
- If all else fails, seek professional consultation with your pediatrician, child therapist or psychologist, or child psychiatrist.

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