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## Chapter 8

# Terrorism and War: Preventing Anger from Fostering Bias and Hate

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When faced with questions and statements about war and terrorism, parents and school professionals are faced with a dilemma between advocating non-violence and explaining terrorism and why nations maintain armies and engage in war. In the aftermath of traumatic events involving people of different ethnic backgrounds, children have been the target of devastating and hateful acts, which have resulted in tremendous sadness, grief and fear. During such a time it is not always humanly possible to respond in any way but to feel hurt, absorb the hate and feel anger towards the perpetrators of the attacks. These feelings can often lead to prejudice against others who we believe may be responsible for the conflict. However, as adults, we need to be aware of and resist physical and emotional hate and empower our children to do the same. The following are some suggestions to help children deal with crisis without becoming prejudiced, stereotyping specific groups or retaliating with acts of bias.

### TIPS FOR HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH CRISIS WITHOUT FOSTERING BIAS OR HATE

**Help children with their feelings** Provide an environment that will allow children to freely express their feelings and acknowledge any pain and anger. Encourage children to keep a journal, draw or talk out their emotions. Providing a means by which emotions can be channeled into positive actions (e.g., reaching out to victims, writing letters and cards, donating supplies and food, planning a community walk) can reduce children's focus on engaging in hurtful attacks on others.

**Set a good example** Children learn from observation of your behavior. Be aware of the impact of your own biases and feelings of anger. Be prepared to respond to purposeful acts of bias because children will carefully observe how you intervene when someone is the target of hate-based behavior. Be vocal in opposing racist views and practices. Use appropriate labels and words when describing what occurred and the individuals involved.

**Tell children personal stories of triumph** The fear that a bad situation will never change can lead children to feel hopeless, which can lead them to use hateful words and exhibit hurtful behaviors. Children need to hear stories of overcoming oppression and surviving with triumphant attitudes. Providing such models show children that people have successfully stood up to hatred.

**Relax and answer the questions** Lack of information about people whom we see as different from ourselves sets the stage for hatred. Hate is also based on thinking or assuming something that is untrue. Treat all of your child's questions with respect and seriousness. Because of your own discomfort you may avoid giving an answer. However, try to answer all questions with short, simple and honest responses. Be sure that you are using language that is appropriate for your child's developmental level. Providing details about events and discussing the answers to your child's questions can prevent seeds of hatred from taking root.

**Correct children** Make children aware of your disapproval if they make an insensitive remark or react with attacks of violence against others. Remind children of how they feel when they are not treated well by others. Set ground rules in your household and classroom



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for how children and adults should behave towards others and develop appropriate disciplinary actions. At the same time, help children learn better ways to deal with their anger.

**Teach tolerance** Proactively teach understanding, openness and empathy skills. Children who are sensitive to other people's feelings are less likely to be prejudiced. Sharing stories of the similarities between different cultures can help them understand the points of view of other people. Blaming an individual or group when fault actually lies elsewhere reinforces hate. Some children may erroneously think that all members of a specific group are terrorists but, as adults, we can help them understand that the actions of a few individuals do not reflect an entire group.

**Model tolerance** Terrorism and war provide a perfect opportunity to discuss the issues of prejudice, stereotyping, aggression and to consider nonviolent ways to handle situations. Unfortunately, it is easy to look for and assign blame, which makes a situation more understandable and makes it feel preventable. Open and honest discussion is recommended, but adults must be mindful of stating their opinions as fact. Discussions should allow for disagreement and airing of different points of view. If children feel their opinion is wrong or misunderstood, they may disengage from dialogue or feel that they are bad or stupid. In discussing how terrorism or war often stems from interpersonal conflict, misunderstanding or differences in religion or culture, it is important to model tolerance. Accepting and understanding others' opinions are necessary steps in nonviolent conflict resolution.

**Respect diversity** It is important that we begin and continue our conversations about diversity and respect for differences. Remind children how important their culture is to them as a way of understanding how other people must feel about their cultures. Expose children to other cultures through books, television, museums and restaurants. Encourage open dialogues and development of friendships with a diverse group of people.

**Discuss larger issues related to war and terrorism** Discussion about larger issues such as tolerance, difference and nonviolent problem solving can also be stimulated by the news. Learning about a foreign culture or region also dispels myths and more accurately points out similarities and differences.