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Discussing Hate and Violence with your Children

Introduction

All too often, the news is filled with acts of hate and violence. A shooting at a Jewish community center, an attack on innocent school children, brutal murder because of a person's race or sexual orientation. . . . these and similar incidents have become familiar stories that punctuate our lives. They challenge our assumptions about the world in which we live and defy easy explanation. Yet, even as we struggle to come to terms with these circumstances, our children and grandchildren are often looking to us for safety and reassurance.

What can we say or do to help our children and grandchildren feel safe?

What can we say or do to help our children and grandchildren feel safe? How do we encourage our children to take appropriate care without frightening them?

Recognize that many of us have questions about how to discuss the issue of hate and violence with our children, the Anti-Defamation League sought advice from Dr. Donald J. Cohen, Director of Yale Child Study Center and Professor of Child Psychiatry, Pediatrics and Psychology at Yale University.

Start With Yourself

- Determine your own perceptions about what has occurred and recognize that your past experiences may influence how you look at the situation.
- Clarify your feelings about what happened, acknowledge them and share them with another adult.
- Consider which personal values have been triggered by the event in question. How does it make you feel?

What questions do they have for you?

Engage Your Children

- Recognize that discussions between parents and children in tense situations can also be opportunities for transmitting values and traditions.
- Share development appropriate information based upon what kind of questions your child has and how much information he/she wants to know. Children who are age nine or older are usually very aware of the news and what their parents are talking about.
- Review what actually happened (the facts).

Related ADL Articles:

[Talking to Your Child About Hatred and Prejudice](#)

[Responding to Hate-Motivated Behaviors](#)

[A Parent's Guide to Hate on the Internet](#)

[What to Tell Your Children About Prejudice](#)

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- Share your perceptions of the situation and your feelings about it. Keep in mind that in discussing traumatic events, it is often tempting to respond to the urgency of the moment and to see it as the "worst." Without diminishing the seriousness of a given circumstance, it is important to keep perspective and convey it. Acknowledge that there are hate groups in this country and that what they promote can be threatening.
- Let them know that many people share their concern over issues of bias, prejudice, stereotyping and violence.
- Emphasize that there are organizations that are dealing with these groups - police, FBI, ADL, etc.
- Put a frightening incident in perspective. Let them know that while there are people who do things that are hard to understand, we live in a wonderful country and, for the vast majority of the time, we are all safe.

Listen to Your Children

- What questions do they have for you?
- How are they feeling?
- Discuss as a family how you want to address these issues. Brainstorm ways you can address these concerns with your own community: standing against name calling in school, making friends with people who are different from you, learning about different groups and identifying ways to enhance your understanding. Be specific about how you can make these things happen.

Considerations for Toddlers and Younger Children

- Give them reassurance. Your statement can be as simple as, "This happened far away and we love you."
- See what, if any, questions they have so you can judge what they need from you.
- Do not give more specific detail than necessary. Be careful not to frighten your children.

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