

## The Canada Parliament Attack in Ottawa Thoughts for Parents and Teachers

None of us want our children to have to grow up in a world with threatening or terrifying events. Children/youth will likely hear about the event currently unfolding in Canada's Parliament and other apparently related ISIS attacks. Many will have anxiety about how this will change our lives and whether we are safe. Often, students don't feel comfortable bringing up their fears. If we are silent, they often interpret that silence as a message to them that we think they should be able to handle their fears on their own, or that we don't even recognize that they may be anxious.

When really overwhelming events happen, we need to let youth of all ages know that we're willing to talk about it with them. We don't have to have the answers, but they are much more comforted by our listening to their fears and giving them what honest replies we can. 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:

- 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.

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.

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.*)
- **Sometimes I don't know what things you hear on the news that seem alarming to you and what things are not upsetting. What kinds of things have you heard in the news that make you anxious? (or... what kinds of things in the news worry kids your age?)**
- **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!*)

We 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. Some suggestions:

- **Whenever something this out of the ordinary happens, everyone in the military and government put all of their energy into dealing with this threat differently. Look at what happened with 9/11. The government changed how it dealt with terrorism and we don't even know how many attacks Al Qaida planned that were stopped. So one thing we can know is that the best minds in many countries are working on this now.**
- **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.'

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 occasionally, 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 she/he is personally worried about it. It gives a little cushion, or a little distance for safety. Many parents talk about how little our children talk to them, but there are two clear contributing factors in this! One is how narrow the parents' questions often are, and the other is how quickly we offer advice or solutions rather than just listening and allowing the child to go deeper! Other questions to help your children talk with you more deeply on a daily basis might include:

- 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.

Try not to always end your conversation with your reassurance to your child. Make a comment that leaves the door open for you to learn more from your child about their perceptions, fears and needs. Before you offer solutions or advice, ask, "What else are you thinking?" or inquire whether they've thought of any solutions or ideas. They become more skilled if we help lead them to their own answers than if provide them our solutions. Leave them with the message that, "We're in this together. Always!"