

Working with **children**

who fear life-threatening events (war, terrorism, disasters, pandemics)



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

First published 2011 by Psych4Schools Pty Ltd
 PO Box 558, Richmond VIC 3186 Australia
www.psych4schools.com.au

ACN 143 954 287 ABN 13 143 954 287
 ISBN 978-1-921908-17-0

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Cover design: Keith Lucas Design Pty Ltd

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Product Type:	ebooklet
Product:	Working with children who fear life-threatening events (war, terrorism, disasters, pandemics)
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Children who fear life-threatening events

Life-threatening global, national and community events can have a negative impact on children as well as adults. The possibility of significant adverse events such as, global warming, war, terrorism, bushfires, earthquakes, floods, drought, or pandemics such as swine or bird flu, occurring now or in the future, can threaten our sense of safety and control.

While younger children depend mainly on parents and teachers to interpret the information provided about an event, older children will get information from a range of sources that may not always be reliable.

The extensive media exposure and reporting of these events and the repetition of stories on the radio, television, in newspapers, online and informally through discussion with others can add to the adverse impact of these events. Increasingly, children are exposed to adult issues they are ill-prepared to deal with. Widespread media exposure may lead some children to worry about themselves, their families, and the future of the planet. This has been particularly apparent following repeated replaying of events like the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA.

Children are especially vulnerable to feelings of loss of safety, fear or apprehension following a significant adverse event. The closer the event is to the child or their family members, the more likely it will have a significant impact on the child. Following or during these events, teachers may observe changes in specific children in their class. Teachers can assist by listening to children's concerns, helping them to cope with their fears by demonstrating that teachers and other adults around them can manage and work their way through adverse events and issues.

Behaviours of children who fear adverse events

Children who fear adverse events may display some of the following behaviours or characteristics:

- speaking about and asking questions about the event
- expressing feelings about the event through creative means, such as playing war games, drawing pictures of bombs and killing, or writing about natural disasters
- writing poetry or stories that indicates sadness, confusion, worry or despair
- acting aggressively or fighting with friends
- being quiet
- withdrawing from others
- being teary
- have difficulty concentrating
- refusing to cooperate
- school refusal.

Children's emotional responses will vary in nature and severity. Common emotions experienced by children following a significant adverse event include fear, confusion, anger, loneliness, sadness,



and anxiety. It is a general principle that whatever you know about a child, the parents should be informed about your observations or concerns.

When to seek further assistance

If a child has been displaying a number of the above behaviours for *more than one month following life-threatening events*, it is recommended that you refer them, via their parents, to a psychologist or the family doctor. If the child is left untreated, a type of anxiety disorder that occurs following exposure to or fear from life-threatening or adverse events may develop, which can remain with the child through adolescence and into adulthood. A diagnosis and treatment will require consultation with a mental health practitioner or doctor.



Strategies to support the child who fears life-threatening events

Acknowledge the child's concerns

- **Listen to the child and acknowledge the fears.** Reassure the child that, given the widespread media attention on the issue, it is understandable they are worried about what is happening and how it could impact upon their lives.
- **Normalise the child's feelings.** Let the child know that media exposure or hearing adults talk about worrying events might lead to heightened feelings of fear and apprehension and that this is normal and that these feelings will subside.

Provide perspective

- **Respond to incorrect information or assumptions about the event.** Explain how information can be distorted when it is passed from one person to the next, as in the game known as 'Chinese Whispers'.
- **Know the facts about the situation.** Don't speculate about what is happening— make sure you know the facts and keep up-to-date. Inform the child or your class about what is actually happening in a way that does not promote further anxiety.
- **Answer questions as honestly as possible,** in an age-appropriate way without 'blood and guts' or information they don't need to know, to avoid further worrying the child.
- **Find out what the child is specifically worried about** and give information on the likelihood of their worry actually happening. Listen to the child carefully. Is the child seeking more information or seeking reassurance?

Provide a sense of safety

Young people need to know they are safe and that their families and others who care for them are also safe.

- **Maintain a stable, consistent and familiar classroom routine** to ensure the child feels secure. It is important that the child understands that the usual classroom and school rules and expectations for acceptable behaviour apply.
- **During war or a terrorism attack, explain to the child that most people around the world want safety and peace, not war.** You might invite 'trusted' guest speakers or initiate a research project around relevant issues in your classroom. It may also be helpful to set work that focuses on peace activists in relevant countries. It may be useful to show video clips from Teacher Tube to begin the conversation. Good websites include, <http://www.internationaldayofpeace.org/> and <http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>.

Provide a sense of control

Children often feel powerless in situations of perceived or actual traumatic events. Help the child or your class to maintain a sense of control by showing them how they can take action. Ideas to help them to do this include:



- **Ask the student body, through the student representative council,** to decide on an appropriate school project to support children and others involved in the adverse event. This valuing of and respect for children's rights to make decisions and create plans can help to build understandings and feelings of order and control, and help in managing confusion associated with a disaster or adverse event.
- **Create a class or school project to raise funds** for a peace-keeping or aid-giving organisation or agency.
- **Write letters of support** to relevant people who are assisting with the issue, such as fire fighters, police officers, doctors, defence forces or politicians.
- **Introduce the practice of students engaging in additional acts of kindness or helping others.**
- **Allow the expression of life-threatening themes such as war or fire into writing or drawing, without criticism.** Incorporating such events into creative activities is very common and helps the child deal with a lack of power. Also see the next two dot points.
- **Talk about heroism or about adding role models into the child's expression of the event.** Ask the child about their drawing, play or writing and suggest they introduce someone who is helping, such as a doctor, fire fighter or police officer. This will help to empower the child.
- **Identify practical or logical actions** for example, if children talk about wars developing from disagreements and fighting, set a 'self-control day' or a 'positive-note day'. Children can learn to improve self-control and use problem-solving skills if things don't go their way. On 'positive-note day' each child writes a positive comment about each student in the class. On the 'self-control day', children must rely on clear communication to express their needs and wants without anger, negativity, touching, pushing or finger pointing.

Help children to understand and cope with their feelings

- **Verbally acknowledge the feelings underpinning the child's behaviour.** It can be difficult to know what to say to a child who is upset, but even just saying 'This is really tough for you' will often help. Try to state the emotion the child is experiencing or express how hard it is for them. For example, you might say 'I can tell you are scared that the fire might start there again next season' (following a bushfire) or 'It must have been scary for those children who were separated from their grandparents during the floods' (following a flood).
- **If the child is angry,** talk with and encourage the child to turn the anger into something constructive that may relieve the issue. Actions could include writing a letter to a politician who can assist with the event or assisting an organisation such as the Red Cross or the Country Fire Authority with fund raising.
- **Teach relaxation techniques to all children.** Learning how to relax assists problem-solving and broad thinking strategies. Being uptight and tense narrows and restricts thinking. See the Psych4Schools relaxation activities, as they become available on the website.

Increase understanding of different cultures

During periods of war or racial violence there can be heightened feelings of prejudice and racial intolerance in some sections of the community.



- **Deal with prejudice.** Do not allow children to be teased or called names in your classroom. If a child makes any derogatory comments, address this issue immediately and explain that this is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.
- **Discuss differences and similarities between groups and cultures, highlighting similarities, and celebrating differences.**
- **Encourage the children—and perhaps the whole school—to participate in Harmony Day each 21 March.** See the website www.harmony.gov.au
- **Play ‘blue eyes’ to demonstrate prejudice or discrimination.** Have the blue-eyed students stand and inform them that they will not be involved in a craft or game for the next five minutes. As a class, discuss the various feelings and the impact this discrimination had on individuals. Take care in playing this with younger students who might get quite upset at being excluded even temporarily.

Communicate with parents

- **Suggest your principal sends information home** about how to help children who are worried about life-threatening or serious events. This information should include the type of behaviours and emotions to expect from children, how to answer a child’s questions, how to minimise the impact of an event on the child and where to seek further assistance if needed.
- **Suggest that parents turn off or limit television, Internet and radio exposure.** Young children may not understand that images of war or serious events are often repeated in news broadcasts and thus can interpret each as a new event. Encourage parents to involve children in alternative activities. Parents can also be advised to avoid talking about the issue when the child is present or to moderate conversation appropriately.
- **Consult the principal** or a member of the leadership team and call the child’s parents if the child is displaying extreme behaviours.
- **If the child shows reactions** such as withdrawal, aggression, obsession with violent thoughts or ongoing sleep problems, refer the child via their parents to a psychologist.

Look after yourself

You need to model appropriate behaviours to the child. The child will be looking to you to see how you are coping. Maintain a positive outlook whenever possible.

- **Monitor your emotions at school.**
- **Keep up your daily routines.**
- **Increase contact with your support networks.** Arrange to see or speak regularly to your friends and family and any other key support people in your life.
- **Engage in activities you find relaxing** such as walking, yoga, listening to music or meditating.
- **See the Psych4Schools ebooklet ‘Looking after yourself’** as it becomes available for more tips and ideas about self-care.

ISBN 978-1-921908-17-0