

## **THE MOODSTERS' GUIDELINES FOR GROWNUPS: TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT HARD THINGS**

It's been a hard, hard time, hasn't it? The many horrifying events here and around the world have all affected American families in different ways. As grown-ups, we often want to shield children from bad things. But children are sensitive to the stress that adults are feeling—and with photos and news coverage and Internet stories everywhere you turn, it's inevitable that children will pick up on them. Experience has taught us that this can shatter their innocence and their trust in the world around them.

Fortunately, children can benefit greatly by receiving age-appropriate information and emotional reassurance from grown-ups they love and trust—grown-ups who can also teach them the important coping skills that will help them thrive, now and in the years to come.

This is why I created The Moodsters: to help children become resilient in the face of adversity and to enable them to bounce *forward* in times of crisis. The Moodsters are here for adults, too: to help you help children! So I've offered here some guidelines for talking to children about hard things.

The Moodsters and I wish you and your family all the best for a safe and happy future!

### **Denise Daniels, RN, MS**

#### **START WITH YOUR CHILD'S LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING**

- Ask what your child has heard about the event. Then let their questions guide your discussion.
- If you don't have an answer, be honest and tell your child you will try to find out. Having answers takes away some of the confusion and can make children feel better.

#### **PROVIDE A BIGGER PICTURE**

- "There are some bad people in the world, but there are many more good people."
- "The Statue of Liberty reminds us that every kind of person lives in America. We look different, act differently and like different things. Just think how boring the world would be if we were all the same!"
- "But sometimes differences can make people feel divided—they think that everyone should be just like them. This can cause misunderstandings, disagreements and anger. Sometimes people get so angry they do terrible things."
- "But when some people do terrible things, other people come forward to try to make things better."

### OFFER COMFORT AND REASSURANCE

- Let kids know that you love them very much and you will always do everything to protect them and keep them safe.
- Together, make a list of all the helpers who care about them and who are working hard to keep them healthy and safe. Offer examples: parents, grandparents, teachers, doctors, nurses, firefighters...
- Point out how comforting it is to spend time with those they love, and who care about them. Reassure them that in the not-too-distant future, they'll be able to do all the things they enjoy!

### GIVE CHILDREN OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS

- Curl up together and talk—or let them talk to a favorite pet, toy, or stuffed animal.
- Listen to their feelings with empathy and *without judgment*.
- Let them know that it's always okay to cry—and that if they have upset feelings, you're there and they can come to you. Remember, feelings are meant to be shared!
- Suggest they listen to music
- Or get some exercise
- Or write or draw pictures about how they're feeling
- Learning to understand and manage their emotions is something children will benefit from for the rest of their lives.

### TALK ABOUT WAYS TO FEEL BETTER

- Help children make a list of things they can do to take care of themselves. Examples include:
- Getting enough sleep
- Eating healthy foods
- Exercising (or dancing, or acting goofy!)
- Creating a schedule so that things feel more orderly and less random
- Helping others—because this makes *you* feel good, too!

### MAKE PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

- When the world seems upside-down, children can benefit from having an action plan that gives them a feeling of control and purpose.
- Ask what their goals are (explain that a goal is something you want to do or achieve).
- Explain that reaching a goal means taking steps—for example, if you want to be a soccer player, you need to practice, join a team, stay healthy.
- Ask what steps they're going to take to reach their goal.
- Create a list of these goals and steps, so they can mark their progress.

### AS MR. ROGERS ONCE SAID, "WHAT'S MENTIONABLE IS MANAGEABLE."

If you keep an **open channel** of communication with your child, validate their **feelings**, help them **take care** of themselves, and guide them in **looking to the future**, even very hard things can be manageable.