

## **Ministering to Children in a Time of Crisis**

### **Revised for the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11**

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A crisis occurred on September 11, 2001. For many of us who lived through it, the events of that day, although very painful and life-changing, are no longer considered crisis in our everyday lives. For children who were very young or those who had not yet been born, the feeling of crisis may be fresh during this anniversary as they hear about the events for the first time. Many children may have difficulty distinguishing between a news story from ten years ago and one that occurred today. Therefore, many of these suggestions presented ten years ago are still just as applicable.

#### **Needs of Children in A Crisis:**

**Love** — They need to know your love, not showering with gifts but physical love.

**Assurance** — They need to have assurance of their own safety, but avoid being overprotective so that they are afraid to leave your side.

**Conversation** — Keep the lines of communication open. Don't spend all your spare time glued to the television. Use such things as selecting pictures in a book or drawing pictures to express feelings. Then talk about the pictures. Take the lead from the children as to how much they need to talk about and know about the situation. Keep answers to questions simple, giving only what is needed. Listen to comments of children as they play. Are there clues here that need further conversation?

**Expression of feelings** — Find opportunities for children to express their feelings, using such things as: toys, puppets, books, music, water play, play dough, painting, and puzzles (creating order out of chaos). Let children know that you have some of the same feelings they have. Be honest about your feelings, but temper them with recognition that God loves even those who have harmed us. God doesn't like their actions, but God continues to love.

**Prayer** — Pray as a family. Pray for those who were injured, those whose family members were injured or killed, those who were and are making decisions, and also those who planned and carried out such an injustice. Keep prayers simple, simply talking to God. It's OK to tell God about your feelings too. Children may want to write out prayers as if they were writing a letter to God.

**God's love** — They need to know that God loves with a happy heart and with a sad heart. During these events, God loved with a sad heart. We don't understand why this happened. We don't believe that this was what God wanted or planned to happen. We will never understand why it happened. But we do know that God is sad, not only sad for those whose families were killed, but also sad for the people who planned and carried out these acts. God wanted them to be happy people who loved others, but something went wrong.

#### **Talking about Death with Children**

When talking about death with young children, play the game, "What's the Really, Really Me?" In this, touch a part of the child's body and say, "Is this the part of you that makes you cry when you are sad or makes you laugh when you are happy?" Then do the same with other parts of the

body. Finally say, "That's the part that doesn't die when the body dies. We sometimes call this our soul."

**Focus**-Children need something aside from the crisis on which to focus their attention. This is a good time to carry out a mission project as a family, for example:

- grow a garden and give food to others
- supply a meal for someone
- bake something for someone
- adopt a room or flower bed at church to work on
- plant a tree or care for yard of some older person
- pray for mission workers

**Reality** — Children may have trouble distinguishing between TV shows that blow up buildings and the factual news reports of this event. They will also have trouble distinguishing between an event from the past and from the present. Talk about the differences. Be clear about the timing. Yes, this really did happen. We can be sad, but we will come through it with God's help.

**Stability** — There is something about the routine schedule that makes it settling. This can be an anchor to help the child realize that life can and will go on.

**Quiet times** — In the confusion of the crisis, children and adults alike need quiet times.

### **Some Additional Thoughts**

Two main questions children are likely to have, whether they communicate those questions or not:

Will this happen to me or to someone I love? (We don't expect it to. You are always loved and have a loving circle of family and friends.)

Why does God make/allow this to happen? (We don't believe that God made this happen.)

A young child cannot understand "We just have to trust in God." They trust in parents and parents protect them. Did the thousands who were killed not trust in God too?

Realize that children may regress in their behavior to get our attention.

*Adapted from information received after 9/11/01 from Delia Halverson, a United Methodist educator in Florida.*

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