

Discussing a terrorist attack with children in the primary phases

Although we would normally advise that teaching and learning in PSHE education is built into a planned progressive programme, there are times when teachers may need to respond more immediately to unforeseen events, such as terrorist attacks. This guidance gives practical suggestions for ways that you can structure questioning, discussion or further learning about such events.

Introduction

When a terrorist attack occurs, children will hear about it in a number of different ways, some of which may be inaccurate, untrue, or based on rumour or speculation. Wherever they happen, events may create feelings of personal anxiety and fear that children can find hard to articulate: giving them a context to discuss, question and express their thoughts and feelings will help them to process what has happened in a safe environment with a trusted adult. One context for this discussion could be within a PSHE education lesson.

This guidance is not intended as a script or lesson plan, but to help teachers answer questions, structure discussion and, if appropriate, extend children's learning and understanding. Teachers should pick out what they feel is relevant for the nature and circumstances of an event, the age and readiness of the children, and their whole-school ethos and values.

As with the teaching of any PSHE education lesson it is essential to establish or reinforce ground rules for a discussion (for further detail, please read the relevant section in our [guidance on discussing controversial issues](#)). In addition, pastoral care, and, if necessary, safeguarding protocols should be available for any potentially vulnerable children after a discussion about an attack has taken place.

Practical tips

1. Offer reassurance

Children, especially younger ones, may be afraid that a similar attack will happen to them, or to their friends and family. It is important to reassure them from the outset of discussion that such attacks are very rare, and although it is possible, it is highly unlikely that something like this will happen to them, or to anyone they know.

2. Encourage questions and answer them honestly

Younger children are naturally curious, and may arrive in school after hearing about a terrorist event full of questions and theories about what they have seen or heard. To ignore, dismiss, or not answer these questions, or to pretend that nothing has happened, can be counter-productive. It is important to answer children's questions honestly and in an age-appropriate

way, in order to allay possible fears, but also to ensure that children are clear about separating basic facts about an event from speculation, rumour or untruths.

3. Clarify the facts

Starting a discussion about a terrorist attack could be broadly structured under three questions:

- What exactly has happened?
- What is happening now?
- How do we know?

It is important to help children separate the ‘basic facts’ that are known (‘a bomb has exploded in a city’; ‘people were injured/ killed’) from inaccurate or speculative interpretations. Make sure you are clear of the difference between factual information, speculation and rumour in your responses to their questions (and to call out absolute untruths).

You could start by giving examples of fact, speculation and rumour that might happen every day – things we know and things we can’t be sure of – before moving discussion on to what has happened. You could also help children recognise the language of fact, speculation and rumour, so they can come to a less confusing understanding about an event.

Examples of responses could include:

Factual information:

- We don’t know for sure what happened/ who did it/why they did it [yet].
- All we know for sure is [*factual, age-appropriate explanation of the attack*]
- Terrorist attacks are often confusing. It may take a long time for investigators to find out what really happened. News from sources we trust such as the BBC will report the facts when they have them.

Language: we know that...; government/the police/the BBC/a trusted source has confirmed...

Speculation:

- Speculation means putting together lots of people’s ideas or experiences of an event and making a kind of guess about what happened. The people making those guesses don’t have any more facts than we do, so their speculations might be wrong.
- Speculations can change, sometimes very quickly.
- Anyone can speculate on what happened, even if they weren’t there. You or your friends might have your own speculations, but it doesn’t mean that they are true.
- It is very hard to understand why some people do such awful things. We can speculate about why this event happened, but we cannot know for sure.
- Sometimes people make up their own speculations because they want to convince us to believe something that *they* think is true.

Language: it seems/appears...; we think...; the story we’ve put together is...; witnesses say...

Rumour:

- A rumour is a story about an event that might not be true at all – each time someone repeats it, it changes a little bit and you don’t know which bits are true, which bits are based on truth, and which are made up.

- People might read rumours on social media and spread them among their friends. Rumours can spread and change very quickly this way.
- Even if lots of people are talking about or spreading a rumour, even online, it still doesn't mean that it is true.
- It's really important to think about or check whether something is a rumour before you decide to believe it or repeat it.

Language: apparently...; I heard that...; my mum's friend's aunty says...; her dad said...; I read on Facebook...

Children of this age will still see parents, older siblings or other adult family members as sources of absolute authority. It is important to emphasise what facts are known about an attack, rather than commenting directly, on, or be seen to be judging, a 'my mum says...'-type comment.

4. Allow children to talk about their feelings

A terrorist attack can create a range of strong feelings within children, including curiosity, anxiety and fear, and even excitement. The feelings they have, and the strength of those feelings, can depend on many things, such as what they have seen or heard, from where or whom they got the information, or if they have some kind of connection – even an apparently tenuous one – to where the event took place or those involved or caught up in it.

The way that children show their feelings will also vary, with some being open about their emotions, and others appearing to ignore or 'block out' what has happened. It is important that the feelings children express are listened to and valued, but differing reactions should be respected, and appropriate 'space' offered to those who need it.

Feelings could be explored by asking questions such as the following:

- How do we feel about what has happened?
- Do we all have the same feelings about what has happened, or are our feelings different?
- What kinds of things/who might affect our feelings? (e.g. family, media, others' attitudes, values etc.)

Providing a 'Worry/Question box' is a good way for children to ask questions anonymously, or submit questions which might come up for them later on, and it can also help you to prepare answers to tricky or sensitive questions ahead of discussion in a PSHE lesson.

5. Encourage community cohesion

Some children may express divisive feelings such as blame – not just of the perpetrator(s) of the terrorist act, but of the group or community from which they came, or on whose behalf they claimed to act. There may also be children in the class and/or school from these groups who might be afraid of others' reactions towards them. It is vital to reassure any children from particular faith or community groups that they are a valued and important part of the school community, and to remind all children of the school's attitude towards behaviours such as bullying or racism.

You can challenge divisive thinking by helping children to recognise the dangers of stereotyping whole groups based on the actions of a small number of individuals – this discussion could be included within a wider PSHE context looking at issues of diversity, community and stereotyping.

Examples of questions for discussion could include:

- Might this event make some people feel differently about a particular country/faith/certain groups of people/a community?
- Do all the people in that country/faith/ group/community believe that what this person did was right?
- Do all the people in that country/faith/ group/community have the same opinions or believe the same things as the person who carried out the terrorist attack?
- Are there any people in our community who may be feeling afraid or anxious at the moment?
- What can we do to make sure that everyone in our school community feels supported and safe?
- How can we help our community stay strong together?

Other things your school can do

- Signpost sources of support, including staff within school who are available if children have further questions or worries.
- Some schools might find a form of reflection helpful (it can, but doesn't need to be religious). This could include:
 - a minute's silence or similar reflective time in a whole-school assembly or within class at the same time in the day (this could tie in with any national 'official' silences)
 - lighting a candle, playing gentle music or writing prayers/non-religious reflections with which to start an assembly
 - creating a remembrance book, or a school display
 - holding a fundraising event for a relevant charity.

Remember that it is also important that members of staff who are leading discussions or activities related to a terrorist attack are given opportunities to 'offload', or talk with one another, perhaps in a staff meeting or similar about the questions children have asked and any issues raised. Staff may be trying to answer questions or deal with anxieties that they themselves may have, albeit at a different level, and they should be offered opportunities to share thoughts and offer or receive support if they need it.