

**Taming Children's Terror**  
by  
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One week after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Oprah opened her show with clips of elementary children making the following comments:

- “I worry about my mommy and daddy and the big buildings they work in exploding.”
- “I saw the planes crashing. I’m afraid someone will get on with a bomb.”
- “‘Don’t worry,’ my parents told me, ‘None of our relatives died.’ It doesn’t make me feel better. I feel so sorry for the people. I just can’t stop thinking about it.”
- “I dreamed I was in the building that the planes hit and it was falling down around me and I couldn’t get out.”

Children fear that which they don’t understand. They fear dangerous things they can’t control. The Bible indicates that catastrophes will increase in number and intensity as Christ’s second coming draws near. As tragedies hit closer to home, it becomes critical that parents know how to calm their children’s fears.

The world of young children is quite small. They feel the impact of tragedies through their parents. If their parents are upset and worried, children will reflect their concern. They might start clinging to Mom, fear going outside, or regress to more immature behavior like sucking thumbs, wetting pants, or wanting to sleep with parents. But if routines continue and

Mom and Dad are there, while these young children may ponder what they see on television or what they hear their parents talking about, life will go on for them.

Not so with older children, whose world now includes teachers, community-service workers, a wider circle of friends, and a greater understanding of life's dangers. The atmosphere of their home environment still has a tremendous impact on them, but no longer can they be shielded from tragic events like airplanes flying into buildings and exploding. You err if you think "the less said about it, the better." Fears grow in a vacuum of ignorance. That's why the following ten terror-taming strategies are so important:

**1. *Talk about it.*** Explain what happened, making sure you talk on their level. Instead of saying, "Terrorists hijacked the planes," you might say, "Bad people beat up the pilots and took over the controls."

And encourage your children to talk. Don't take silence as an indication that they aren't affected. Some children don't ask questions because they see their parents upset and they don't want to cause more pain. Ask your children, "What does this mean to you? How does it make you feel?" Unresolved fear erupts in nightmares, day dreaming, regressive behavior, and mood changes. If you observe any of these behaviors in your children, it's a good sign they still haven't talked through their fears.

**2. *Turn off the TV.*** In the first four days after the September 11th terrorist attack on New York City and Washington, D.C., many children saw the horrifying images dozens of times. It was as if the attacks were happening again and again and again, each time reinforcing the terrifying images on their minds. So, after they've seen enough to know what happened, turn off the TV and listen to soothing music instead, or talk about school and family things.

**3. *Control your own reactions.*** Children pick up cues on how they should respond to a

crisis by watching their parents. So, give them a model of how to handle their insecurity and grief. Cry, then dry your tears and focus on something positive. The calmer and more objective you are, the better.

**4. *Stay in touch.*** Eat meals together as a family and read books to your children. It's reassuring to them just to hear your voice. And hug your kids and let them know you will protect them. As First Lady Laura Bush said, "Now is the time for every parent to put their arms around their children and reassure them that they are loved and cared for."

**5. *Talk about what's good in tragic situations.*** Rather than focusing on the pain, loss, and death, tell your children stories of the heroes in the tragedy: Of the man who carried the crippled person down 84 flights of stairs at the World Trade Center or of the firemen caught under the rubble who encouraged each other until rescuers arrived.

**6. *Don't worry about regressive behavior.*** If children suddenly become clingy or want to sleep in your bed, don't make a big deal over it.

**7. *Tell them the truth.*** "This was an isolated event. No one has the ability to hurt everyone. Mommy and Daddy will not leave you. Bad things may happen, but you can choose to smile, help others, and look for the good."

**8. *Give them something to do.*** Have your children write thank you notes to people who helped, or let them make sympathy cards for those who lost loved ones. Involve them in a bake sale to raise funds for the victims. When children have something to do, they feel empowered and useful. Fear usually diminishes when they're helping others.

**9. *Give them hope.*** Say things like, "Americans are a strong, resilient people. Nothing can destroy our country." Share with them Lamentations 3:21, 22: "There is one ray of hope: his compassion never ends."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God never stops loving us.

**10. Strengthen their faith in God.** Reassure them that regardless of what happens, God still holds the whole world in His hands. Sing praise songs. Read them Bible stories of God’s deliverance. A good example is the time Elisha’s servant thought the enemy was going to kill them, but God opened his eyes so he could see horses and chariots of fire protecting them.<sup>2</sup> Tell them about their guardian angel, who will never leave their side—even when bad things happen or Mommy and Daddy can’t be there. Have them memorize Bible promises like: “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.”<sup>3</sup> Pray for courage. Pray that the bad dreams will go away. Pray that God will put a hedge of protection around your family and give you the faith needed to get through tragedies.

You can’t shield your children from tragedy, and you shouldn’t if you could—they’d grow up with unrealistic expectations about life. But if you handle crisis situations wisely, you will give them the tools they need to deal with similar situations when you’re no longer as much a part of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup>The Living Bible. <sup>2</sup>2 Kings 6:17. <sup>3</sup>Psalm 34:7.

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