



Talking with Children About War, Terrorism, and the News

by Vicki Straughan

Our world faces complicated political issues with the conflict between the U.S. and Iraq, dissenting world views, and the continuing war on terrorism that impacts almost every nation. The images of the A-Day, the so-called "Shock and Awe" bombing of Iraq, drove home with inescapable and horrifying power the reality of war. The repeated broadcast of the 9-11 horror of the World Trade Center attack and collapse lingers in all of our minds.

How these issues affect our families is paramount to us parents. A parent's desire to be proactive in caring for his or her children during this unprecedented set of circumstances is to be commended. Following are some guidelines for talking with children of all ages.

Most parents would never consider allowing a small child from ages 0-5 to watch a television program that contains graphic violence and/or language. However, many parents will allow a child to be present while the news, which frequently contains both graphic images and language, is broadcast. While dealing with reality, news programs also have an agenda to outpace their colleagues in the delivery of information on extraordinary topics. Small children cannot discern between their own magical thoughts and reality, so limit their viewing of news programs. A number of child development experts and psychologists have emphasized that younger children cannot discern the difference between one attack and repeated attacks when they see repeated videotape of the same event. To them, each showing of the original event is a new attack, increasing anxiety and emotional impact with each showing.

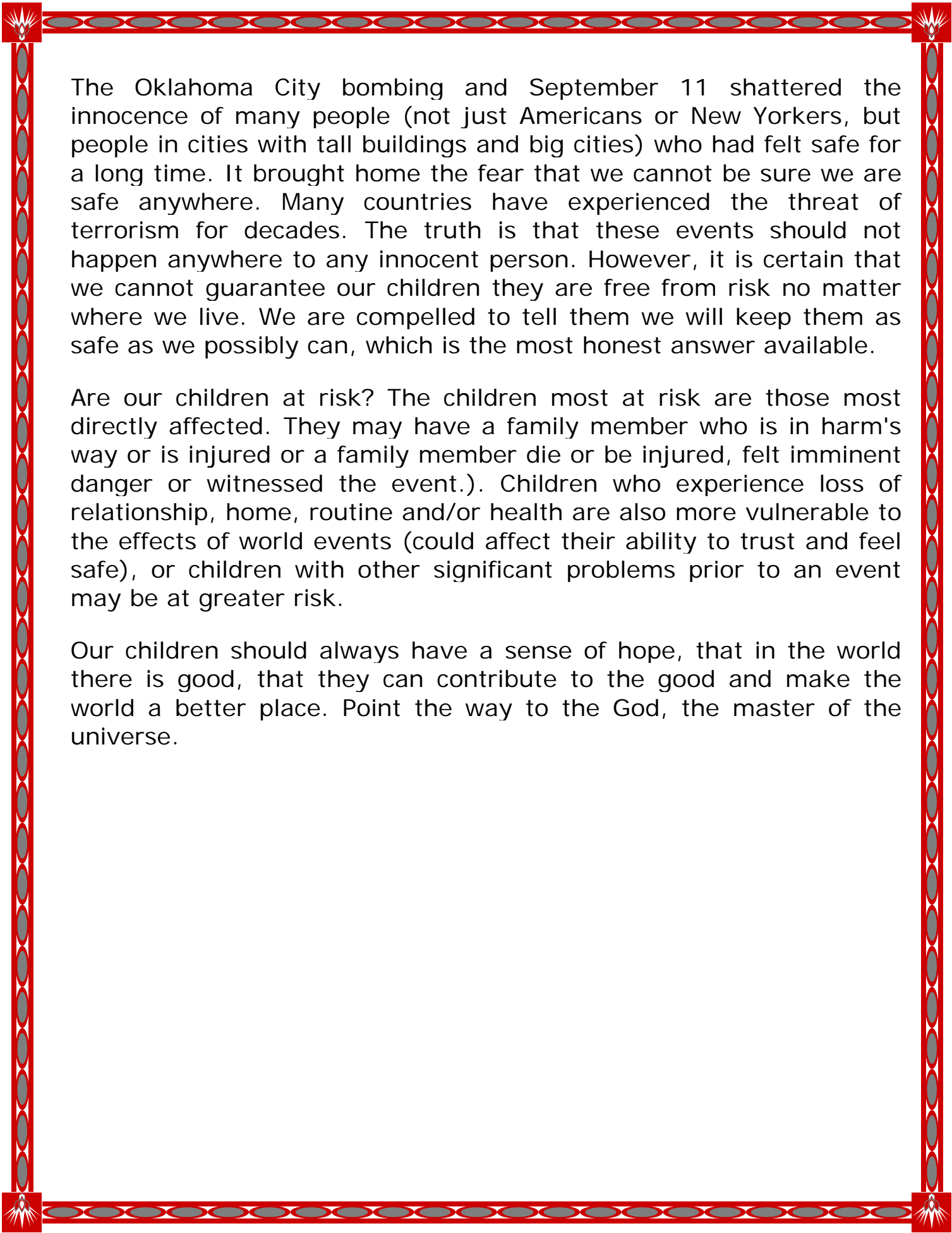
When a child asks a question on the topic of war, terrorism or other

difficult topics, explore what information the child has and the source of that information. "Tell me what you heard," is a good opening for this topic. Make sure your own anxiety about the topic does not manifest as accusing tone or manor. "Who told you that?" could shut a child's inquiry down, where "Tell me more about who was talking and what was said," opens the dialogue for a child to talk and a parent to listen and eventually reassure the child.

Children ages 6-10 know what is going on. Parents often underestimate children this age in regard to their perception of events. Children this age require honest feedback on their thoughts and feelings. To help a child gain perspective, watch television news with them and discuss what you hear. You may also choose to turn off the television, once again to limit the information a child receives. Use this time to teach your child your values and beliefs, but avoid placing all people of a certain heritage into one category. Whether "for" or "against" a topic or regardless of one's stance on a military action, an individual can be passionate without inciting a child to hate a certain culture or race of people.

Your adolescent may have his/her own opinions on political matters, war, as well as other pertinent topics. A parent's role is to keep communication open so that the teen can gain perspective and filter the information they are receiving. Your conviction that your teen needs your guidance will likely conflict with the teen's desire to individuate. Don't discount their views. Once again, acknowledging an adolescent's interest, as well as his/her feelings, will go a long way to keep them talking with you. Reveal your own confusion, if it exists, and explain the complexity of the world and its issues.

Being a willing listener will improve not only a child's understanding of a topic, but also increase his/her confidence and self-esteem. Your willingness to listen gives them the message that what they think and feel matters. However, it is appropriate to correct misinformation and dispel myths. If a parent models a balance of critical thinking with possessing an open mind, a child learns to temper curiosity with responsibility for getting adequate information before forming opinions.



The Oklahoma City bombing and September 11 shattered the innocence of many people (not just Americans or New Yorkers, but people in cities with tall buildings and big cities) who had felt safe for a long time. It brought home the fear that we cannot be sure we are safe anywhere. Many countries have experienced the threat of terrorism for decades. The truth is that these events should not happen anywhere to any innocent person. However, it is certain that we cannot guarantee our children they are free from risk no matter where we live. We are compelled to tell them we will keep them as safe as we possibly can, which is the most honest answer available.

Are our children at risk? The children most at risk are those most directly affected. They may have a family member who is in harm's way or is injured or a family member die or be injured, felt imminent danger or witnessed the event.). Children who experience loss of relationship, home, routine and/or health are also more vulnerable to the effects of world events (could affect their ability to trust and feel safe), or children with other significant problems prior to an event may be at greater risk.

Our children should always have a sense of hope, that in the world there is good, that they can contribute to the good and make the world a better place. Point the way to the God, the master of the universe.