

## **Back to School-*Helping Children deal with their Worries***

The December 16 terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar has left both adults and children concerned about safety in general and school safety in particular. The ensuing security alerts regarding potential threats to schools and the sudden closing down of schools all over the country, have further heightened these concerns.

Many children may already be sharing these worries either directly or indirectly. Talking to them can help them deal better with these concerns. If you are unsure of how to help, the general guidelines given below may be useful. Some of these are more applicable for younger children, others for older ones. You know your child best –use what you think will help her/ him and remember to use age appropriate language.

1. Praise them for sharing their concerns–Tell them you are proud and very glad that they are sharing their feelings and worries with you and want them to keep doing that. *'I am happy that you are talking to me about these feelings', 'Its very brave of you to share these'*.
2. Validate their feelings –Let them know that such situations can make children feel anxious, scared, worried, etc. *'Yes it is Scary –'*
3. Tell them about things that others are doing to try and keep them safe –the police, school, etc. You may already have some information. It is important to be honest and share information that you think is age appropriate. *'I know that your school is making sure that they keep a check on who is allowed inside', 'Maybe I can call the school and find out what they are doing regarding some of the worries that you have shared.'*
4. Try and put things in perspective by reducing the generalizations and the heightened fear they may be experiencing related to situation and/or people. *'There are thousands of schools in Pakistan and that this kind of bad incident happened in one school which means it did not happen in the rest'. 'Majority of the people around us are good people but yes there are some people who do bad things –that does not mean that everyone is going to do bad things'.*
5. Encourage them to link up with friends who will also be returning to school. *'Who among your friends can you talk to about their plans for school?'*
6. Share with them stories of how people are standing up against what has happened –coming out for vigils, demonstrating, putting

memorials. *‘ Despite the fear and worries many people come out for vigils, protests etc. All this takes courage and means that we that we will not be defeated by bad people’. ‘Children by going to school, adults by going to their offices, families when they go shopping –all are being brave and saying we will not be defeated’.*

7. Help them come up with strategies they have used in the past when they have been worried and scared –share what has helped you. Remind them of their strengths. *‘What helped you in the past when you had felt worried and scared and lets see if the same things can help you in this situation?’*
8. Together come up with some tips on what they can do if they get worried or scared. Some of these could be:
  - Distracting your self by doing something fun –taking a storybook along and reading it, talking to a friend etc.
  - Imagining and transporting yourself in your mind’s eye to a Safe Place –it will be helpful if you have talked about your safe places together as a family i.e. each person describes a place where they feel safe and relaxed (how it looks, smells, sounds, feels like) Children could draw this safe place if they want. Then any time they are feeling worried, they can imagine or look at the drawing.
  - Do some deep breathing –as you breathe in imagine a beautiful color and as you breathe out, imagine letting out all the fears and tensions. Again, do it together as a family and have fun doing it.
  - Teach them the difference between Helpful thoughts and Unhelpful thoughts. Helpful thoughts are those that make us feel good, strong, calm. Unhelpful thoughts are those that make us feel scared, weak, helpless. Show them how they can learn to control their breathing if they pay attention to it. Similarly if they pay attention to their thoughts they can control their thoughts as well and change them into helpful thoughts.
9. Identify some adults or friends they could talk to if they need to while in school. *‘Lets think of and identify some adults/teachers and friends who you can talk to if you need to’*
10. Limit exposure to media –also share with them examples of how what everything that is said on the media is not necessarily true.

*Most important, watch your own anxiety level –children pick up on parent’s anxieties so talk to them when you are calm and not hassled. Remember that it is best for your children to return to their routines.*

Dr. Ambreen Ahmad is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist with over thirty years of experience working both in the United States as well as Pakistan. She currently practices in Islamabad. She is also a Founding Member of Rozan, an Ngo working on issues of Emotional Health, gender and violence against women and children.