

Talking with Your Children About the Current Climate and Islamophobia

Explain in an age-appropriate manner: Hopefully parents or guardians will be the first to talk with children about an event that may affect your child. Try to explain in simple, clear terms what happened, using words and concepts your child is likely to understand. Explain Islamophobia as a reaction – “People are scared when something bad happens. They worry it might happen again, and they worry about how they can stay safe. Sometimes, instead of just blaming and being angry at those who did this awful thing, they think everyone who is in any way like the people who did this is somehow to blame too. So, if one Muslim did this awful thing, they think, well this must mean that all Muslims are bad. It’s not right, and it’s not fair, but sometimes, some people think like this.”

Listen to your children: Ask what they have heard about the event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions at an age appropriate level. Don’t assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be during an activity, such as drawing or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. For example a child may see a shooting on television and assume it happened in their neighborhood, not many miles away. Also, it is not uncommon for young children to repeat what they saw or heard over and over again to help them process what happened. Be truthful but don’t tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the event, be clear that you will always do your best to keep them safe. Let them know adults are working hard to make sure they will stay safe. School-age children may be assured to know that a person responsible for a violent crime has been arrested and does not present a danger to your child or the school. Also talk to your children about their own physical safety – discuss common sense steps they can take to make sure they stay safe. Do so without causing them alarm or undue fear.

Pay attention to your own reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the events, your children will be more easily reassured. It is okay to let children know that you are upset and concerned too, but be sure to show them how you can remain calm even if you are upset.

Monitor access to media: It will help if young children do not watch the news or see otherwise graphic images. Young children who see an event on the news may think the event is ongoing or happening again. Monitor your own viewing of media – often we think kids cannot hear and see what we’re watching and reading, however they tend to pick up on a lot more than we realize.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior that they are still struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, sleep problems, wanting to sleep in your bed, or bed wetting. They may feel guilty that they were somehow to blame for what happened, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible. Ask your older children what they are seeing/ hearing on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.

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Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities: mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc. reduce anxiety and help children feel more in control by allowing them to know what to expect.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and don't assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: For older children, have discussions about ways they can contribute to both their faith community and their community at large. Discuss how they may answer difficult questions about their faith. Times like these can make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activity we can engage in that makes us feel in control, helps us to feel less vulnerable.