When terror strikes, here’s what you should tell children

Judith A. Myers-Walls, a professor emerita at Purdue University, has studied the impact of political violence on children and offers these tips for both parents and educators in how to handle the Paris attacks:

● Assume that elementary school children have heard something about the attacks. If they haven’t mentioned it on their own, a parent or a teacher might bring it up. First, find out what they know. For the youngest kids, maybe ask them to draw pictures of what they think happened, or have them make up a story or a play. If they seem less aware or less interested, you might not want to go into depth.

The key, Myers-Walls says, is not to ignore what happened but not to focus heavily on it. Maintaining routine is an important way to reassure young children. Events are happening in the world, but they’re still going to go to school, they’re still having lunch, they’re still playing with their toys. Reassure them that they are safe, that the event did not happen near them, it involved a relatively small number of people and there are many adults who are keeping them safe.

If you are living in a community with a large population of French people or those from the Middle East, the topic is going to be more central. For everyone else, treat it the way you treat other current events. Say something about it, but do not going into great depth.

Myers-Walls cautions against what she calls the “cycle of silence,” a phenomenon that researchers have found when adults avoid discussing traumatic events with children because they are uncomfortable, and children conclude that it’s not okay to bring it up.

“Pretty soon you’ve got this cycle of silence with both sides not talking about it and you lose the opportunity to work through it together,” she said. “You may think the kids haven’t noticed, but maybe they did. It’s important to at least open the door.”

● It’s important to help children separate the actions of some violent people from the rest of that community, she said. With the Paris attacks, there’s going to be a public backlash, against Syrians, against people from the Middle East, against Muslims, Myers-Walls said.

“This is a great opportunity for schools and parents to say ‘let’s learn something about Syria, Lebanon, France,’” Myers-Walls said, noting that children might not only be afraid to learn about a terrorist attack, they might be sad or angry.

“It’s important to give them a sense of control by helping them find something they can do, like helping people who are injured who are close to them,” she said. “Sending letters or cards to children in the hospital – even if it is unconnected to this event – will allow them to help people who are hurting.”

● Middle school students and high school students will want to know the causes of the attack, Myers-Walls said. “They want to know causality and they want to know who to blame,” she said, adding that educators and parents should focus on the larger context, teaching about Islam and Middle East history.

But be sure to include stories of successful peacemaking efforts, too, such as that of Malala, the Pakistani girl shot by the Taliban who became an education activist and the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. And tap into the natural idealism of children at age 11 and 12 by encouraging action of some kind, Myers-Walls said. “They could decide as a school to do a recycling project – it doesn’t have any direct connection to the event but it’s a way of taking action and doing something,” she said.
High school students can explore in depth the nature of prejudice, political violence and political conflict, she said.

“This is an interesting time for high schoolers,” Myers-Walls said. “We’ve been at war for more than a decade, most of their lives. The Paris attacks are closely related to many of the deployments we’ve experienced. High school students can talk about what the U.S. response should be, what the country is doing diplomatically, what kind of action can they take to support what they think is important. It’s very important, especially for teachers, to recognize there will be a variety of opinions. Some students may relate to the military, some people are pacifists, some may want to ignore this.”

Myers-Walls has a Web site — called Purple Wagon — with more resources for parents about children and political violence.