



# ON PROPHETIC WISDOM AND SPEAKING TO CHILDREN IN TIMES OF DISTRESS

BY RANIA AWAAD, M.D.

*A remarkable trademark of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, was that he spoke to children at their age-appropriate levels.*

To draw inspiration from the Prophetic wisdom on how to speak to young people, particularly in times of distress, one need only reference the Prophet's gentle interaction with his young companion, Abu 'Umayr, upon recognizing the child's grief about the death of his pet. Perhaps the most striking lessons we learn from this interaction was that the Prophet, peace be upon him, recognized the child's distress,

inquired about it, then approached the child with gentleness, validation and in a non-blaming manner that both recognized and healed the emotions the child was experiencing.

It is imperative that we engage our children and teens in their moments of distress and avoid shying away from discussing difficult topics. When a disaster strikes our families and communities, it is very likely the

young ears in our homes have heard snippets of our conversations and picked up on our own distress and that of other adults around them. While it may not be age-appropriate to give children the full details, hushed conversations coupled with little reassurance is a definite recipe for more fear and confusion. Here is a set of tips that we as parents can implement to help quell the fears and anxieties of our children and teens related to distressing news:

**1 It starts with us:** Unplugging from social media, centering ourselves, processing our own emotions, debriefing with those whom we trust, being conscious of



what we say and how. The way we react will have an impact on our children-our reactions cue them in on how they should react too. It is okay for our children to see us in a controlled state of frustration or sorrow as long as we are able to help them feel secure. It is also okay for us to delay the conversation with our children in order to give us time to process our own emotions- so long as we are able to get back to reassuring them.

**2 Prepare:** How we talk to a 5-year-old will be different than how we talk to a 15-year-old. Simple language can be used with younger children while a more detailed discussion may be needed for older children. Educating ourselves about various angles of a tragedy helps us gain a sense of control and enables us to convey a balanced perspective to our children. In the Islamic tradition, we believe that good can emerge from any tragedy. Before talking to our children, it would be best to consider the key messages and values we want to express ahead of time.

**3 Inquire:** Even young children may have heard about a horrific tragedy. If we have children in different developmental stages, we might consider talking to the entire family first at the youngest child's level and then individually with each child.

**AGES 3-6:** Avoid sharing horrific news with children in this age group if they are unaware of it. Only if we suspect they know something (like mentioning it to an older sibling or while playing, for

“ Signs of distress like regression or not wanting to go to the school or the masjid after news of a shooting, for example, are signs to invite them to talk.

**4 Listen:** It is important that we first understand what is going through our children's mind so that we can understand what they might actually worried be about. Many parents jump right to troubleshooting and problem-solving mode. Yet in doing so we may increase our child's anxiety by projecting onto them our own adult-level fears. Listening with more than our ears helps keep us tune into our children's non-verbal communication. Listening also means removing distractions like phones, computers and the like. It's important to note that children may need to talk about what they are hearing and feeling for a number of days in order to process the implications.

example), should we ask children 3-6 if they've heard about anything that upset them.

**AGES 7-12:** Wait and see if they ask us. There is no need to discuss horrific news with this age group unless we suspect or know they will be exposed to it. Signs of distress like regression or not wanting to go to the school or the masjid after news of a shooting, for example, are signs to invite them to talk.

**TEENS:** Assume they know- but don't assume their knowledge is complete.

**5 Validate:** Open up the conversation by asking a simple question like, "What things are you concerned or upset about?" Once the child responds, validate their concerns even if they don't match our own or make sense immediately. For example, "It sounds like you are feeling (name the emotion). I can understand that." In trying our best not to minimize their fears, we allow our children to properly express their emotions. Children and teens often need help naming what they are feeling- labeling emotions (upset, angry, scared, disgusted, disappointed, etc.) helps bring them back to a balanced state.

We will need to fill in the blanks and correct flawed or misleading information they received from friends or through social media.

**CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS OR DISABILITIES:** Gear questions to the child's developmental level or abilities, rather than their physical age. If the child is aware of the events, provide details or information in the clearest and appropriate manner possible.

“ As parents, we need to model hope and strength in our identity as Muslims.

**6 Simplify and Correct:** Abstract ideas can complicate matters and scare young children. Using familiar terms and not over-explaining are both helpful for young children. For a mass shooting one may say, “A very confused and angry person took a gun and shot people. The police are working to making sure people are safe again.” Tweens and teens are more likely to hear news from unreliable sources, so they need the truth to come from us. They are more likely to respond better to us if we accept their sources but give them the tools to view the information critically. When we teach them to ask questions about what they saw or heard, it helps them think beyond a clickbait headline or meme.

**7 Model Hope and Faith:** As parents, we need to model hope and strength in our identity as Muslims. Conveying pride in our Muslim identity and seeking solace in our faith is crucial to our children’s development. This is an opportune time to remind ourselves and our children that Allah is in control of everything and is the best of planners. Putting trust in Allah and channeling feelings of hopelessness into meaningful contributions to the world around them is one of the most important forms of healing. When children and teens feel that they can make a positive impact, it restores the soul and boosts the resiliency they will need their whole lives.

## MOST COMMON MISTAKES

**Minimizing:** Suppressing the conversation or minimizing children’s reactions or fears can manifest itself in physical symptoms. Some signs to look for that they are having difficulty adjusting include:

- **Physical:** Children may complain of feeling tired, having a headache, stomachache, or generally feeling unwell.
- **Emotional:** Children may experience sadness, depression, anxiety, or fears.
- **Behavioral:** Look for signs of social regression, acting more immature, or becoming less patient and more demanding. Children who once separated easily from their parents may become clingy. Teens may seek assistance to their distress from substance use.
- **Sleep:** Watch for trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, difficulty waking up or nightmares.

Sometimes it can be hard to tell if a child is reacting in a typical manner to an unusual event or whether they are having real problems coping, and thus in need of extra support. If you are concerned, talk to your child’s pediatrician or mental health professional. If you prefer that your child speaks with a Muslim mental health professional, you can find ones in your locale here. Some Muslim counseling centers such as the Khalil Center offer both in-person and online therapy options. In all cases, do not wait for the signs. Start the discussion early, and keep the dialogue going.

**Over-exposure:** One of the most common mistakes is talking about horrific events in front of children and assuming they do not understand or will not be affected. The other major source of over-exposure is via media coverage of violent tragedies. Children age eight and younger have difficulty telling if what they hear and see on screens is fantasy or reality, and this ability develops gradually with age. This is why experts recommend against allowing children under age eight to view media containing any type of violence. Even after the age of eight, graphic or repetitive exposure to violence can cause children to virtually relive the event over and over. This can lead to children developing long-term anxiety, depression, anger, and even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

**Feigned Indifference:** It is possible that despite our attempts to use the seven steps above to engage your children, they might not want to talk to us about their concerns. That is okay, but we must offer them alternatives such as other trusted adults who can help them. Also consider teen help lines such as Khalil Center, Stones to Bridges, Amala Hopeline, or Naseeha. At the very least, let them know that help exists.



## KEEP MARCHING AHEAD

Tragic events stay in our collective memory and may cause very real fear and anxiety. However, they are also teachable and character-building moments to reinforce our values within ourselves and our children. As parents, it is important for us to practice self-care. Overstimulation from constantly checking our news-feeds will likely raise our anxiety levels which our children will likely pick up on. As families, it is imperative that we connect with communities that provide spaces for encouragement, support, and understanding and serve a healing purpose for each member of the family.

Finally, a parting reminder that we are created to worship Allah, Most High, recognizing that He is in full control and is the best of planners. We must hold fast to our principles and values, and be a forward-looking people who constantly work on improving ourselves and the communities around us.

“ ..we are created to worship Allah, Most High, recognizing that He is in full control and is the best of planners.



During these difficult times, if you are feeling distressed, overwhelmed or struggling to cope with what has happened to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christchurch, LMA is offering free counselling support to community members.

To book an appointment, contact:

**M: 0416 937 425**

**E: [psychsupport@lma.org.au](mailto:psychsupport@lma.org.au)**

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Rania Awaad, M.D. is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Stanford University School of Medicine where she is the Director of the Muslim Mental Health Lab and Wellness Program and Co-Director of the Diversity Clinic. She pursued her psychiatric residency training at Stanford where she also completed a postdoctoral clinical research fellowship with the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Her research and clinical work are focused on the mental health needs of Muslims. Her courses at Stanford range from instructing medical students and residents on implicit bias and integrating culture and*

*religion into medical care to teaching undergraduate and graduate students the psychology of xenophobia. Her most recent academic publications include works on Islamic Psychology, Islamophobia, and the historical roots of mental health from the Islamic Golden Era.*

*Through her outreach work at Stanford University, she is also the Clinical Director of the San Francisco Bay Area branches of the Khalil Center, a spiritual wellness center pioneering the application of traditional Islamic spiritual healing methods to modern clinical psychology. She has been the recipient of several awards and grants for her work.*

*Prior to studying medicine, she pursued classical Islamic studies in Damascus, Syria and holds certifications (ijaza) in Qur'an, Islamic Law and other branches of the Islamic Sciences. Dr. Awaad is also a Professor of Islamic Law at Zaytuna College, a Muslim Liberal Arts College in Berkeley, CA where she teaches courses on Shafi'i Fiqh and Women's Fiqh. In addition, she serves as the Director of The Rahmah Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating Muslim women and girls. At Rahmah, she oversees the Murbijyah spiritual mentoring program for girls. Dr. Awaad is a nationally recognized speaker, award-winning teacher, researcher and author in both the Islamic and medical sciences.*