

# The effects of graphic images from the Boston bomber trial on children

March 6 2015

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After two months of jury selection and several motions to change the venue, the Boston bomber trial is expected to last until June. The prosecution in the Dzhokhar Tsarnaev trial will present graphic evidence, including videos and photographs of the bombing which will undoubtedly be shown by the media and on the Internet exposing millions of people, including children, to the images of that horrific day.

Boston University School of Education professor Jennifer Greif Green, along with colleagues from BU and Florida International University, have presented research on the impact the bombing had on [children](#) and how teachers and other educational professionals can help children deal with the event. The results of their most recent study can be found in School Mental Health.

Professor Green offers her views on what impact graphic images of the Boston Marathon bombing, as well as horrific images from ISIS, Charlie Hebdo shootings and the Boko Haram massacre, have on children.

**Q: The trial of Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is set to begin. Media coverage might include images and video of the events of that day. How can schools prepare teachers, children, and staff with what they may face during this time?**

Jennifer Greif Green: I appreciate this question because it acknowledges that school staff have an opportunity to prepare in advance for upcoming coverage of the Tsarnaev trial. As a first step, school staff can have thoughtful conversations in which they anticipate the types of reactions and needs of students at their school. Students in closer proximity to the attack and manhunt, or schools where students were personally affected, should anticipate more intense reactions from members of the school community. Second, teachers and other school staff can be prepared to acknowledge that students might have a wide range of feelings about the trial and its outcome (anger, fear, relief, and not having strong feelings are all normal reactions). Third, teachers are in a good position to watch for students who might benefit from increased support. While most children will be fine, children who seem to be particularly distressed by the unfolding of the trial, those who demonstrate significant changes in behavior, and children with extreme reactions should be considered for additional supports.

**Q: What impact do terrorist acts like the Charlie Hebdo shootings, the Boko Haram massacre, beheadings by ISIS and a recently released video by ISIS claiming to show a child executing Russian agents, and, locally, the Boston Marathon bombing have on children?**

JGG: Terrorist attacks and threats, such as the ones that you describe, are very frightening and disturbing – not just for children, but for adults, too. Although these recent events have occurred overseas, children can still be impacted by viewing images of terrorism and hearing about events. Watching videos and news coverage can raise fears about increased threat to our own safety.

Research studies repeatedly show that exposure to terrorist attacks impact children's psychological wellbeing. In a study conducted at BU and led by Dr. Jonathan Comer at Florida International University, we found that following the Boston Marathon attack local children had increased rates of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and behavior problems. For the majority of children exposed to terrorism, these psychological problems will decrease over time, but for some children they are severe and long-lasting.

**Q: How should teachers respond to children's questions about terrorist acts? What should children be told? Does talking to children about terrorism scare them more?**

JG: When children ask questions about terrorist acts their teachers have an opportunity to listen carefully and gauge students' knowledge and understanding of events. Teachers can then correct any misinformation and respond to questions in clear and age-appropriate language. Students should be encouraged to ask questions – depending on their age, many will have heard about these events and there will likely be things that they are wondering about. By responding to questions and inviting students to ask more questions as they come up, teachers are communicating to students that they are available to provide support.

That said, talking about terrorist acts with a classroom full of students can be very tricky. Students have a wide range of reactions and different needs. For example, while some students might benefit from expressing and exploring their feelings about recent news, others might not want to discuss events at all. In addition, individual students might have their own personal history with trauma and victimization that impacts how they respond to current events. While initial conversations might need to be brief to address these varying student needs, teachers should

encourage more in depth conversation with students on a one-to-one basis.

Our research team recently published the results of a survey of Boston-area teachers following the 2013 Marathon attack. We found that [teachers](#) described a wide range of approaches to addressing the attack and that there was a great deal of variation in school-based supports provided to [students](#).

**Q: Do children who were not at tragic events like those listed above, as well as 9/11 or the Sandy Hook and other school shootings, develop symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorders as a result of media coverage of the events?**

JGG: They certainly can. There is evidence from research conducted after the Boston Marathon attack, as well as following other mass crises, that exposure to media images is associated with increased risk for [posttraumatic stress disorder](#). For children (and adults) repeated viewing of these traumatic events can reinforce feelings of fear and the belief that the world is not safe.

Provided by Boston University

Citation: The effects of graphic images from the Boston bomber trial on children (2015, March 6) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-03-effects-graphic-images-boston-bomber.html>

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