

A generic framework for discussing a terrorist attack

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Introduction

Whilst we would normally advise that all learning in PSHE education is built into a planned progressive programme, there are times when we may need to respond immediately to unforeseen events, such as terrorist attacks. When terrorist attacks occur, young people may wish to talk about them and the context for this discussion may be in PSHE education lessons. It is impossible to create a 'one size fits all' lesson plan that will be appropriate for all such events but the questions below may be helpful in structuring discussion.

The following questions are not intended to be a script but rather should be seen as a bank of possible openings for discussion and you should select those that feel most relevant for the nature and circumstances of the event and the age and readiness of your pupils. There is a 'vocabulary' for deconstructing these events which provides an opportunity to explore such events with young people (see italicised words below).

Terrorist attacks can create a variety of strong feelings, including curiosity, excitement, anxiety or fear. Although actual events may be geographically distant they may create feelings of personal anxiety and we explore this below.

To pretend nothing has happened can be counter-productive. Many young people will want to discuss events and providing opportunities to process what has happened in the safety of a classroom can help them refocus on their other learning.

This may not be true of all young people. Some, perhaps those that have a strong emotional connection to events may initially wish to ignore or 'block out' what has happened and this should be respected. It is possible they may wish or will feel ready to discuss it at a later time and should be offered appropriate 'space'.

Young people can show their distress in a variety of ways, not all being obvious. Pastoral care, and if necessary safeguarding protocols, should be available for any vulnerable children or young people.

Although many of the questions below are applicable to any event, there is an emphasis on questions that relate to a deliberate incident such as a terrorist act. These acts may be especially difficult for young people to comprehend and may generate considerable anxiety.

The aftermath of these events can bring out both positive and negative responses in human beings. Education is central to enhancing the first and challenging the second. As with the teaching of any PSHE education lesson it is essential to establish or reinforce ground rules for any discussion (for further detail, please read the relevant section in our [guidance on discussing controversial issues](#)). It is essential that no child, young person or group of young people feel isolated or that they have to 'defend their community or faith'.

Deconstructing events

Learning can be organised under some broad questions offering students an opportunity to explore:

- What exactly has happened?
- What is happening now?
- What could happen next?

It is possible to explore the questions below simply through discussion however this relies on pupils' existing recollections and interpretations of events. It can be helpful to make use of material such as carefully selected newspaper articles or images from the media to help stimulate and focus discussion. For example placing different images or articles on different tables and asking groups to circulate, responding perhaps by building a collective mind-map recording their thoughts, questions or messages before using their work to open a wider discussion.

It is important that young people can separate the 'basic facts' that may be clear (for example 'a bomb has exploded in a city') from inaccurate interpretations. Exploring the difference between factual information, speculation and rumour is helpful in this respect.

- *Factual information*

Terrorist attacks are often confusing. It may take time for the people involved to investigate, analyse and conclude exactly what has happened. Factual information is usually *corroborated* or *confirmed* by a number of credible sources rather than just one.

- *Speculation*

The factual information available following an event may be very limited. This may therefore be supplemented by inputs from a variety of professionals and perhaps witnesses who try to interpret what has happened. At this stage they may have no more information than we have so their initial speculations may be wrong. It is important to ask if their speculations are '*valid*', do the facts support them; could the facts support different *interpretations*?

There may be individuals or groups seeking to capitalise on these events for their own benefit. It is important for young people to recognise this behaviour. They should ask whether a source of any speculation is using this opportunity to promote or convince the audience of the validity of their own beliefs or further their cause.

- *Rumour*

The stories that circulate after such an event that may or may not have any foundation in truth.

Social media now offers a platform for factual information, speculation and rumour and it is essential that young people can recognise the differences between them. Critically, young people need to understand that the number of people (even if they include their friends) who support a rumour does not make it 'true'. The 'Chinese Whispers' effect of social media may encourage highly misleading rumours to circulate.

These may develop into '*conspiracy theories*' where collective imaginations start to construct increasingly unrealistic but often quite seductive explanations for events. It is therefore important to check out if any *facts* support a rumour, if we have *all* the facts and if there are different interpretations of these facts.

Our capacity as a species to see patterns and make connections is fundamental to what makes us intelligent, but it is also a vulnerability. At times of anxiety people look for meaning; there is a danger that people make inappropriate connections and may use limited facts to justify their conclusions.

Since these events are likely to generate strong feelings, ask students to question:

- What do I think and feel about what has happened, is happening and might happen next? What do others think and feel?

Questions to help explore initial feelings

Feelings could be explored by asking the class the following questions:

- How do we feel about what has happened?
- Are these feelings appropriate – is it 'okay' to feel like this?
- Do we need to 'put on hold' or challenge any of our immediate feelings?

For example, feeling *empathy* for any casualties and their families or *anger* about the actions or behaviour of the perpetrators may be entirely appropriate. We may feel the impulse to *blame* someone; the following questions can help explore this:

- Are these events causing us (or encouraging us) to feel differently about a group of people or community?
- Are we in danger of '*generalising*' the actions of a few to a larger group or community?
- Is there any *actual* connection between what has happened and these communities and if there is, is it meaningful?

When encouraging young people to reflect on their own feelings and to check out their factual basis, it may be helpful to reference the Oslo attacks in 2011. In the immediate aftermath, it was evident there had been a bomb in the city but many observers incorrectly concluded that it was an attack by Islamist extremists when in fact it soon transpired that the attacker was a far-right extremist.

When discussing the dangers of generalising, it is worth citing examples where it is clear that perpetrators of acts of violence do not have the backing of their entire community, faith or cause. In the case of the murder of Lee Rigby, one of the killers broadcast on social media within minutes of the attack referring to himself as a 'soldier of Allah'. However Farooq Murad, secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, called the murder a "barbaric act" and said that Muslim communities were "united in their condemnation of this crime". He added that "this was a dishonourable act and no cause justifies cold-blooded murder."

In both of these examples, critical thinking needs to be employed not only on the facts of the event and who was responsible but also on the subversion of a faith or a cause and the danger of stereotyping whole groups based on the behaviour of a small number of individuals. It is worth noting that to do so may further serve rather than challenge the perpetrators' agenda.

This can be confusing for young people if an attack is carried out in the name of their faith or a cause they may support. It is important in such circumstances to be clear that one can have such feelings whilst still strongly disagreeing with the actions the perpetrators have undertaken.

Exploring the feelings of others

Exploring the following questions can be an important follow up discussion.

- How do other people appear to be feeling – locally or nationally - through the media?
- What are they saying, suggesting or doing and how do we feel about this?
- Do we think this is appropriate or inappropriate? Why?
- If we think it is inappropriate how might we safely challenge it?

One of the goals of terrorists can be to separate communities. Sharing feelings can offer great source of comfort and cohesion. It can unite a school, local or national community against those individuals who claim they act in the name of and with the backing of those communities. They can help to confirm that the vast majority of individuals share the same values and abhorrence for the actions and behaviour of the perpetrators.

Feelings, especially expressed through ‘blame’ can be divisive and young people need the space to consider how the negative feelings of others in a community can become ‘contagious’, especially if a number of people have the same strong feelings which focus on ‘people to blame’.

Young people could consider how the strongly held opinions of large numbers of people can begin to have an apparent ‘validity’ simply through strength of numbers. This can be amplified through social media. It is vitally important that young people explore why this is potentially dangerous and recognise that strength of opinion does not necessarily equate with reasoned argument. It is important that young people have the opportunity to reflect on the factual evidence they have gathered and use this to evaluate its ‘validity’.

With this in mind, it is helpful to explore:

- Are there any individuals or groups who may be feel vulnerable at the moment?
- How can we support them?
- What activities can we undertake to prevent terrorist attacks from dividing our community?
- How can we create a community that reduces the risks of such attacks from occurring? (For example how can we develop greater tolerance and mutual respect?)

Follow up

It can take time for people to process these types of events. For this reason it is worth offering opportunities for follow up discussions if they are felt to be needed, for example by providing a question box for pupils to leave questions that may occur to them over time and signposting sources of support.

A terrorist incident, especially one that feels ‘local’ or one to which we feel a ‘connection’, can have lasting impact on individuals and communities. Schools, through their PSHE education programme and their wider curriculum can provide a forum to support community cohesion and perhaps, even if only in a small way, help to limit the damage inflicted by such an event.