

Talking with our Children About Traumatic Events

As time goes by, we start to reflect on the deeper meaning of such events, and our children, in particular, may seek explanations to try and help put these tragic events into perspective.

How do we talk with and comfort our children about these situations? Following are some guidelines from national experts that may help you communicate with your children about these recent events.

1. Get a clear picture. Don't bring the event up proactively; wait for your children to ask about it. When they do, get a clear picture of your child's understanding by asking your child what he or she understands about the recent events and their meaning. This will help you gauge your child's level of understanding and help you decide how much or how little information you want to discuss.
2. Listen carefully. Listen to your children, paying close attention to their emotional signals as well as their words. Children may often say one thing but their body language can reveal more than first meets the eye. It's important to listen carefully so you can correct any misperceptions, and paint a clear picture for your child. Make sure your child knows she/he can ask questions and be receptive to his/her needs. By being active listeners, parents can determine how much stress or worry their child may be experiencing.
3. Adjust your response to the child's need. After you've determined their level of understanding, distress and needs, respond in an age-appropriate manner to questions and concerns. Sometimes, just reassurance that parents are safe is all that is needed. Other times, a more detailed explanation may be called for.
4. Assure your child that he or she is safe. It is critical to communicate to your children that they are safe and that as parents, we do everything possible to keep them safe. Explain and make sure they understand this. Let them know there are many people-parents, teachers, police, firefighters-there to protect them. Older children can understand the role of the FBI in protecting them and the citizens of our country.
5. Give your perspective. Older children and adolescents will look for your personal perspective on the events-which helps them form their own values and beliefs system.
6. Answer truthfully. Respond to questions in a direct and truthful manner. Do not try to shield children by withholding information. Use your judgment to provide information in an age-appropriate manner and in a way that suits the personality of the child. However, limit your answers to specific questions. Remember that too much information can overwhelm a child.
7. Let children express their feelings. There are many ways children can express feelings of grief, sorrow or anger: drawing pictures and sending them to firefighters, creating a lemonade stand and donating money to children overseas, praying or initiating a class project. The important thing is that they find an outlet for their feelings and find genuine acceptance and support.
8. Provide increased physical contact. Many children will consciously or unconsciously express the need to be close to you. Extra hugs and snuggling would provide needed contact for children to feel safe.

9. Begin healing. Take control of the situation. Return to normal routines. Do something positive: give blood, make a donation, volunteer. Each step toward normalcy helps children and adults heal.

10. If needed, seek therapy. If your child is showing signs of stress or anxiety that is not relieved (such as changes in behavior, increased aggression, trouble sleeping, fatigue, loss of appetite, or disinterest in normally favorite activities) consider talking with a mental health professional who specializes in caring for children. Your pediatrician might be a good place to start. Or, contact the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) toll-free at 877-668-AGPA (2472) or 212-477-2677 (www.agpa.org) for a list of group psychotherapists and affiliates in your area.

The following blog from AGPA Community Outreach Task Force Co-Chair Suzanne Phillips may also be of help: <http://blogs.psychcentral.com/healing-together/2012/12/connecticut-catastrophe-how-do-you-face-the-loss-of-children/>

References

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