



Dealing with harms that have already occurred

This topic describes some methods by which parents and caregivers can assist children who have been disturbed by an experience with the media.

Children may have been exposed to scary or violent material on television, film or video. However, the events of September 11 have brought to many people's attention that children can also be traumatised by being exposed to reports and images from frightening world events. For each age group below there are tips for dealing with both kinds of media trauma.

Some facts about children's fear responses to scary media

The reaction of children to scary or violent material will depend to some extent on factors such as:

- individual personality traits such as their sensitivity, vividness of their imagination, susceptibility to visual images, loud noises or 'mood provoking' music
- the media on which the material has been viewed (on the big screen or on a video)
- whether or not they are with trusted adults at the time.

In general though:

- fear is an intense concern or worry caused by real and/or imagined danger
- children younger than five years old cannot always tell fantasy from reality. Media depictions of attacks can be as scary as real attacks
- all children, even the very young, have a sixth sense that enables them to be aware of an adult's fear and anxiety
- children will respond differently at different ages. See the age specific information below.
- Some children will exhibit fear through behavior, not words. Behaviours that could alert you to the fact that they may have been exposed to scary material are crying, abnormal fussiness or agitation, sleep disturbance, bed wetting, unusually clingy behaviours and greater than normal sensitivity. At the extreme end, there are documented cases of children being so traumatised by viewing violent material that they have had to receive inpatient psychiatric treatment.

General tips for helping children with fear

If you are with your child at the time that they are exposed to scary or violent material, the more immediate your response the better, in the first instance calmly removing them from the situation.

Following this, or if you become aware that your child is reacting to something they saw while you were not with them, the best overall strategy is to acknowledge their fear and reassure them:

- take your cues from the child. Don't assume they are more afraid than they may be. Conversely, don't assume that they are unaware of what has happened.
- take their fears seriously. Don't try to talk them out of it.
- respond calmly. Don't exaggerate their fears by using extreme language or by overreacting.
- answer their questions directly but don't give them more information than they are asking for or that they need
- provide physical reassurance with lots of hugs and touching
- make sure they know that it's okay to ask questions
- manage the media diet of coverage according to their age.

Babies and toddlers

Provide assistance to your child as soon as possible after the event in the following ways:

Scary or violent material on television, film or video

- understand that behaviour problems may be part of their response and give extra reassurance and support
- give lots of physical reassurance.



Violent local or international events as shown on TV News or current affairs programs

In addition to the general tips above, you can help your child at these times in the following ways:

- shield babies and toddlers from media reports as much as possible
- be aware that it is very hard for young children to make sense out of what they see and hear and this can make what they see even more frightening.
- be aware that sensational and disturbing images may be repeated many times and keep the TV and radio off while your children are at home. Repeated viewings will only make the situation worse.
- try not to show your own anxiety because children will quickly pick up your feelings and know there is something wrong. While they won't know exactly what is going on, very young babies and toddlers may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense."

Preschoolers

Provide assistance to your child as soon as possible after the event in the following ways:

Scary or violent material on television, film or video

- listen to their feelings and encourage them to talk about them
- give lots of physical reassurance. Understand that the child will need more comfort, especially at bedtime.
- keep to normal routines, which give young children a sense of safety and security.
- give lots of opportunities to play, draw and paint (without guiding them). This helps children to deal with feelings.
- understand that behaviour problems may be part of their response and give extra reassurance and support.

Violent local or international events as shown on TV News or current affairs programs

Preschoolers may be quite tuned in to what has happened. They have probably heard or seen media reports and have probably heard others discussing the events. Preschoolers are most concerned about their own safety and the safety of their parents, relatives and friends. They are not always able to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

In addition to the general tips above, you can help your child at these times in the following ways:

- be aware that it is very hard for young children to make sense out of what they see and hear and this can make what they see even more frightening
- be aware that sensational and disturbing images may be repeated many times and keep the TV and radio off while your children are at home. Repeated viewings will only make the situation worse.

- try not to discuss what has happened in front of the children
- calmly explain that what has happened is in another country and a long way away and reassure them that they are still safe.
- acknowledge that something very scary has happened, but that you and other adults will make sure they are safe. Let them know that adults will figure out what is going on.
- try not to show your own anxiety because children will quickly pick up your feelings and know there is something wrong.

Early primary school

Provide assistance to your child as soon as possible after the event in the following ways:

Scary or violent material on television, film or video

School age children may still show worries through behaviour as well as or instead of talking about them. They may show them by not wanting to go to school, by behaviour problems or by physical symptoms such as headaches or tummy aches.

A lot of the above suggestions for helping pre-school children will still be appropriate for school age children. In addition:

- give them lots of opportunities to talk about their feelings and their fears. Bedtime is often a good listening time.
- validate their feelings as real.
- let them know they can talk to you any time they are afraid.

Violent local or international events as shown on TV News or current affairs programs

In addition to the general tips above, you can help your child at these times in the following ways:

- a child of this age will be more aware of what is going on and the reactions of other people. They will feel a great deal of concern for their own safety and safety of family and friends
- limit TV coverage. Visual images can have a powerful impact. If they ask questions give them information without unnecessary detail.
- it is important to be honest with them. Tell them what you know about what happened without exaggerating or overreacting. Don't assume that they are too young to know what is going on.
- acknowledge that something very scary has happened.
- emphasise that they are safe and that adults will find out what is happening.
- keep to routines that provide a sense of safety. Some things you can do in the time when you usually watch TV might be playing games, walking the dog, shopping, gardening, a bike ride things that give your family a sense of togetherness.

- try to help them with their fears by talking through the issues according to their age and understanding eg “Sad and scary things do happen in the world but they are rare and there are lots of sensible people who are working to stop things like this happening”.
- most of all think about your own response. Frightening world events such as September 11 tap into our own sense of insecurity. It is really important to hold on to the sane and down to earth aspects of our daily life and this is what will make the world feel safe for your children.

Upper primary school

A lot of the above suggestions for helping lower primary school children will still be appropriate when they are in upper primary school. In addition:

Scary or violent material on television, film or video

- it is still important to acknowledge and talk through their feelings
- explore their capacity to start applying rational thinking to what they have seen.

Violent local or international events as shown on TV News or current affairs programs

In addition to the general tips above, you can help your child at these times in the following ways:

- children this age will be very aware of what is going on. They may be prone to exaggeration. Jokes or humour can mask fears for this age group.
- talk to your child and answer any questions.
- acknowledge any feelings of fear, horror, and anger.
- provide comfort and reassurance.
- children this age will be more interested in details. Share what you know but don't overwhelm them.
- some children may act out scary feelings or may become more withdrawn. Talk with them and ask them to tell you about their feelings.
- use historical examples (e.g. World Wars, Challenger Space Shuttle, etc.) to explain that bad things happen to innocent people but as people and as a nation we go on with our lives and resolve bad situations.

High School

Even young people can show their feelings by their behaviour and may withdraw or become aggressive under stress. Provide assistance in the following ways:

Scary or violent material on television, film or video

- it is important to react to the feelings behind the behaviour rather than the behaviour itself
- discuss what they have seen and point out the tricks used to achieve the effects
- respond to their feelings but also appeal to their rational abilities to comprehend.

Violent local or international events as shown on TV News or current affairs programs

In addition to the general tips above, you can help your child at these times in the following ways:

- young people are very aware of what is happening in the world and often very vulnerable
- it is important to talk about what has happened, to listen to their feelings and share yours, but remember they are looking to you and your response for their own sense of safety.
- remember that reactions to a crisis such as this may continue or come back after the media response has died down
- young people in high school have probably already talked about the attacks with friends. It is important to be honest with them and let them know what is going on. This age may be glued to TV, eager for news and details.
- acknowledge fear, sadness, and anger.
- some teens may also just block out the whole thing and refuse to acknowledge that anything big has happened or that they care. This often masks real fears and feelings of being overwhelmed.
- some teens may make jokes. Let them know it's not funny without lecturing them.
- some teens may be very interested in discussing issues that this tragedy raises. Be willing to engage them in serious discussions.
- be careful to avoid placing blame on a whole group of people or targeting particular groups.
- use historical tragedies as a basis for conversation. Talk to your teen about how the situation may be resolved in terms of rescue workers, governmental responses, foreign policy changes, etc.

Managing your own response to world tragedy

- it is important that adults also support each other. Talk about your feelings with friends.
- remember that there are many, many people working together to make the world a better place, and there will be many heroic deeds happening during this crisis that will not be seen on TV but which attest to the sane and good forces in the world
- keep up your usual routines and things you enjoy
- try not to watch too much TV!
- remember that you are the rock for your children no matter what their age. If you keep calm and caring they will usually be OK.
- if necessary seek help—if you are worried about your own or a child's immediate or ongoing reactions seek professional help.

Useful links

- Discussing the News with 3 to 7 Year Olds: What to Do? (US)
- Helping Children Understand Crisis and Trauma (US)
- Helping Kids Handle Tragic Headlines - Dr Sears (US)
- How to Talk to Your Children About the News (US)
- Talking with Children about Violence - also on Spanish (US)
- Talking to Kids about Tragedy: How to Respond to Fears, Questions (US)
- Talking with Kids About the News - also on Spanish (US)
- When Your Kids Hear about Scary News - Diane Levin (US)

Books and articles

- Cairns, E. & Dunn, J. (1996) *Children & Political Violence (Understanding Children's Worlds)* NY: Blackwells.
- Cantor, J. (1998) *Mommy, I'm scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them* (US: Harcourt Brace)
- Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. (1998). *Before Push Comes to Shove: Building Conflict Resolution Skills with Children*. St. Paul: MN: Redleaf Press. [Companion children's book: Best Day of the Week by Carlsson-Paige.]
- Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D.E. (1990). *Who's Calling the Shots? How to Respond Effectively to Children's Fascination with War Play, War Toys, and Violent TV*. Gabriola Island, BC, CA: New Society.
- Deskin, G. & Steckler, G. (1996). *When Nothing Makes Sense: Disaster, Crisis, & Their Effects on Children*. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press.
- Garbarino, J. (1996). *Let's Talk about Living in a World with Violence*. Chicago: Erikson Institute.
- Garbarino, J. et al. (1991). *No Place to Be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Keller, S.F. (1988). *Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children When a Friend Dies*. Boston: New England Association for the Education of Young Children.

Levin, D.E. (1994). *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

Levin, D.E. (March/April, 1995). *Understanding and Responding to the Violence in Children's Lives*. Beginnings Workshop: Violence in the Lives of Children; Child Care Information Exchange. 102, 34-38.

Levin, D.E. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood: Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. (Wash, DC: Nat. Assoc. for the Ed. of Young Ch, 1998). [See Ch. 7: "When Pretend Meets Real, Responding to Violence in the News".]

Marsh, C. (1999) *Tough Stuff: How to Talk to Kids about Disturbing Contemporary Issues, including Sex in the White House, Guns at School, Drugs Everywhere, War, and More*. NY: Gallopade International.

Obiakor, F., Mehring, T. & Schwenn, J. (1997) *Disruption, Disaster, and Death: Helping Students Deal with Crises*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Terr, L.C. (1990). *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*. NY: Harper & Row.

Trozzi, Maria. (1999). *Talking with Children about Loss: Words, Strategies, and Wisdom to Help Children Cope with Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times*. Berkley Publishing Group, 1999.



For more information about Children and the Media, call the
Young Media Australia Helpline

Up to date and reliable information for parents and caregivers about the impact of the media on children.

1800 700 357

Freecall anywhere in Australia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
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www.youngmedia.org.au

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