

Protecting Children During a Horrific Event

By P. Donohue Shortridge

A violent or terrible event has happened in the world and you may wonder how to talk to your children about it. Here are some suggestions, first for those under six years old, and then for children 6-12:

For Children Under 6 years old:

Young children are especially sensitive to disturbing events because they feel the effects just like we do, but they do not yet possess the cognitive and emotional capacity to understand what is happening. You'll want to shield your children from the news of this event as much as possible.

- Keep a routine. The most upsetting disruption to young children is chaos and uncertainty. Keep life simple and predictable.
- Music and singing will not only sooth your children, but will lower your stress level as well. A walk in nature together will remind all that life is beautiful.
- Do not watch television news or view the event on your computer screen or ipad in the presence of your young children. The news is disturbing, and therefore it is appropriate viewing only for

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adults and, sparingly, for some older children. The urgency of the voices, the swelling music and the visuals of the dead bodies and destruction are confusing and upsetting to young children because they think it is happening right now and right here. (Even infants and toddlers take in these sounds and images.) Also every time they see the event on screen, they may think it is happening again and again. Beware of the visually disturbing news alerts during regular

programming. This may be a good time to revisit your policy on television in your home, generally. You'll likely want to know what is going on with the event and if television is a habit in your house, you may turn it on automatically. It might be hard to change this habit, but doing

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so will shelter your young child from confusion and distress. Record your favorite news show and watch it after the children are in bed.

- Radio news and opinion talk shows are also disturbing because the words are out-of-context and the child fills in the gaps with his own magical thinking. Play a music tape instead.
- Newspapers and magazines with lurid headlines and pictures should also be kept out-of-sight of children. Simply turn the pictures facedown on the table.
- Refrain from adult discussions of the tragedy in front of your children. Ask older children, relatives and visitors to wait till the younger children are not present. Become aware of your telephone conversations that might be overheard. Remember that your child takes in everything he hears and sees whether he understands it or not. You are not being rude to people when you protect your children. You can simply say to anyone who brings up the subject of this disaster in the presence of your child, "I'd like to discuss this with you, but I'd prefer we wait till later."
- Become conscious of your own mood. Your tension and anxiety will immediately transfer to your children. It is natural that you are upset by

this event, but consider that your child takes his emotional cues from you. Regardless of whether or not your family is in immediate danger, remember that children always live in the here-

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and-now. This event is not their concern. We can preserve their sense of security by defending their freedom to be children. We help them most by exuding a calm, nurturing attitude. Deep breathing, good nutrition and simple routines will boost your stamina and even-temperedness to enable you to be present for your children, and that comes first.

Children between the ages of 6 and 12 are capable of grasping the realities of this event more abstractly than can younger children, however they are just as vulnerable to its effect. They have an enormous imagination. They can think creatively and imagine the worst and the best.

- Stories can be a creative outlet for children's emotions; stories that they write, stories that parents tell and stories that the family can read together. Choose stories about people facing problems and doing something about them, stories about heroes being brave or people facing adversity and prevailing. Some children may be interested in stories about soldiers and pilots or firefighters or other heroes in this disaster. Also, read or tell stories about children your child's age doing something about a problem the child in the story is facing. This is also a good time to choose stories about people doing good deeds from different cultures.
- Define terms and locate places. Children will hear many words for which they do not know the meaning. Give them definitions for words they may hear and look at a map together and locate the place where the event occurred. Calmly and factually note how far or near it is to your house.
- Children will absorb the tension from the culture around them. It rests in their bodies. This is an excellent time for rigorous physical exercise,

especially fun things done together. Go for a family bike ride along the bike path; get a group together for a touch football game. Clean out the garage together, hauling trash to the dumpsite and sweeping and ordering family possessions. Creating external order does help create an internal order.

- Children of this age will feel helpless and may want to do something. Encourage personal action. Some kids may want to raise money or express their voices in some manner, so encourage that. Offer guidance and support with their efforts, but do not do it for them. Other kids may want to write sympathy cards or write to the people involved in the event. Let your child lead with how he or she wants to participate.
- Children may experience bad dreams, fear and regressive behaviors. A parent's empathy and comfort makes all the difference. Your child may want to talk about his fears and have lots of questions for you. He may ask why did this happen? Don't gush on about the causes, mostly

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just listen and mirror back his question. You can say, "That's a good question." Don't feel like you have to have an answer to everything. Being a good, patient listener is essential to their feeling heard and supported.

- Limit the amount of television they watch. If you do watch together, temper your emotional responses. A panicky parent will create a panicky child. Do not express your darkest adult fears in front of your child. Be sure to find some other adult you can talk to about these things. Keep your most intense tears, fear and anger to your private spaces. However, you can acknowledge to your child that it is scary, it is OK to show that you are sad and to let a tear fall, but know that your child will pick up emotional cues from you. When you are with your child, keep your reaction to the event in perspective with the reality of your child's life.

- Be careful not to let your fears for the safety of your child, real or imagined interfere with your child's life. Do not disrupt daily routines or trips unless absolutely necessary. Do not express your

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fear of losing your child to your child. This is a parental fear best explored with another adult. It is not fair to a child to have that burden put on him. Be careful not to smother your child. Although something bad has happened, your personal overreaction may engender in him a fear of taking normal, age appropriate risks.

- You can tell your child that he is safe and that you will always be here. This is the time to be sure you pick up your child on time and to conscientiously do what you say. Do not give them anything more to worry about. Keep a regular family routine. They are looking for security and although you cannot prevent what happens in the outer world, you can provide stability in their world.

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