

Helping Children Feel Safe in Unsafe Times

Upsetting or violent community or national events put everyone on edge. The extensive news coverage can add to the heightened fear. Children are particularly at risk for feeling scared. The following are suggestions for helping children at such times.

- * Determine your child's risk for problems. Children who are directly impacted by the events, children who have had previous traumatic experiences, children with previous mental health or learning problems, or those lacking a strong support network are more susceptible to new or increased problems. Even children who live outside the dangerous area may be at risk from exposure to media information.
- * Expect variations in mood or a change in behavior, which may be manifested differently at different ages. Young children may become more clingy, may return to earlier behaviors such as bed wetting, and have difficulty expressing their fears in words. School-age children understand that bad things can happen and may worry about the safety of their family, or have difficulty sleeping. Teenagers may be angry and may be embarrassed about having depressed or worried feelings. Physical complaints—headaches and stomachaches—may also be a sign of problems.
- * Be alert to children who may be reluctant to leave home, attend school, or worry about the safety of caregivers.
- * Provide reassurance. Discuss safety precautions taken by authorities. Review appropriate personal safety measures. Emphasize that the chances of harm are remote and you're doing everything possible to keep the family safe.
- * Maintain routine. Familiarity brings comfort and helps children feel safe and in control.
- * Monitor your own reactions and be mindful of how issues are discussed when children are near. When surrounded by news or talk of events, worry can be contagious—from child to child, adult to adult, and from parent to child. Calm parents encourage calm in their children.
- * Keep in mind that children's reactions depend on their age, personality and coping style and tailor discussions and precautions to their particular concerns.
- * Be confident about your decisions and be truthful and honest when answering questions. Hiding information causes children to be mistrustful rather than comforted.
- * Monitor TV viewing. Restrict news for young children who can be confused by repeated presentations of the same event. Limit viewing by older children and watch with them to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Correct misinformation and help them distinguish between facts and rumors. Know that children will pick up information from outside the home as well.
- * Model appropriate coping behavior. Acknowledge upsetting feelings without minimizing them, but also discuss ways to manage concerns. Provide an environment for ongoing conversations; talking about being afraid doesn't make a person more afraid.
- * Use and teach strategies for dealing with stress and worry, such as music, talking to friends, reading or playing board games, all of which require different kinds of mental energy that will compete with worried thoughts. Engage in exercise and maintain healthy eating and sleeping habits.
- * Consider getting involved in charitable activities related to the incident. Contribute time and energy to community or religious activities that offer support to those in need and increase a sense of well being.
- * Communicate with other adults involved with the child, coordinate any necessary changes, utilize school and community resources.

These tips are from: Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D., Associate Professor, NYU School of Medicine and Director of Bereavement Services and Outreach, www.AboutOurKids.org