

--- RESPONDING TO CHILDREN AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT ---

As a psychologist working with law enforcement personnel and their families, I frequently find that adults underestimate the impact their vocation has on their children. Individuals are often told to accept that someone in their graduating class will probably die within the course of their career. It becomes more complicated when we bring our families into the close-knit “family” of law enforcement, fire department, and emergency services. How do you talk to your children when you are in pain because your partner/co-worker died? What if you never even knew the individual but the media has the funeral and details about the death all over the news? While you might be able to protect your children from some harsh realities, you cannot protect them from what others say to them at school, what they misinterpret from the expressions on your face and from them paying attention to what you don’t say. When something significant occurs and has an effect on the parent, parents are understandably unsure of how to approach their children or if they should talk to them at all. Remember -- your children are watching you and are dependent on you to model how they should manage their emotions. People involved in high-risk professions often cut off their emotions in order to manage their feelings, without realizing how this choice may effect their children. The following information was compiled to assist parents in talking with their children about the tragedies that occur within their profession.

ROLE OF ADULTS WHEN DEALING WITH CHILDREN:

- Adults can be inclined to rush in with reassurance before the child can finish talking. Children need to master their traumatic experiences through verbalization and repetitious play. It may be noted that children act out more aggressively in their play. It is typically a way of gaining control over their anger and their fears.
- Adults often are unsure whether to admit to children that they are also frightened, sad, or angry. It is helpful to model for children how adults learn to manage their fears. Identifying some of the things that help you can help children to generate solutions of their own. (i.e. “Sometimes when I’m sad [angry, frightened, frustrated, heart-broken] I...)

- Adults can clarify distortions and offer reassurance *after* the child has expressed their thoughts and feelings. Children may ask numerous questions because they learn through repetition. Children may also need help in being able to label their feelings. For example, if you notice everything makes them “angry”, help them to identify the other emotions they may be feeling...frustrated, sad, disappointed, afraid, hurt, etc. (Note: Adults do this too.)

- Research indicates that adults tend to underestimate the level of distress in children. Adults need to recognize that listening to children verbalize their feelings can provoke anxiety. Adults need to find their own support for learning to cope with their feelings. You are more likely to be a support to a child if you have your own social and emotional support systems.

DO

- * Sit down and ask questions about their play
- * Help them to verbalize their frustration & feelings.
- * Listen, listen, listen. Children may take a long time to sort out what they are trying to say.
- * Give them ideas for how to cope with their uncomfortable feelings.

DON'T

- * Watch their play and then yell or get angry at them for being “mean” or label their play as “bad”.
- * Take away “bad feelings” by rewarding children with food, toys, etc.
- * Speculate on what God is thinking or feeling and why this tragedy occurred.

SHORT-TERM REACTIONS ARE LIKELY TO INCLUDE:

- Raised levels of anxiety
- Clinging behaviors
- Fear of separation from parents
- Pessimistic about the future
- Increased irritability
- Sense of vulnerability
- Emotional outbursts
- Survivor guilt
- Nightmares
- Heightened alertness to dangers
- Difficulty managing change

- Poor memory/concentration
- Withdrawal from others
- Difficulty with self-expression
- Fear of something bad happening to or losing loved ones

Difficulties may appear to resolve on their own, however, you may expect to notice an increase in anxious reactions during significant points throughout the year, such as the anniversary of the original traumatic event, holidays, or birthdays. Other events that trigger emotional reactions may include school examinations, performances (sports, music, oral reports, etc.) or family gatherings.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS OF CHILDREN ACCORDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL:

Preschool Children – Tend to show their distress by disruptions in eating and sleeping patterns, with fearful or anxious reactions, or difficulty relating to others. May become extremely upset during separation from parents.

Elementary School Age – Tend to become afraid of other people based on hostile and suspicious feelings that are often stereotypical (i.e. they shot him because...race, “bad”, etc.)

Ages 5-7 - Primary concern is generally anxiety about separation from parents. Children retell events with a mixture of fantasy and fact. “Will this... happen to us too?” “Will we have to go away?” “Will you (parent) have to go away while I’m at school?”

Ages 7-11 - Primary concern is related to bodily injury and fear of being hurt. Children tend to insist on the facts of the events with conflict among those who do not agree on what actually took place. “What if we are killed?” “What if our arms or legs get shot off?” They can become gory in their descriptions of their fears.

Adolescents – Adolescents have more true discussions; they try to deal with frightening possibilities by thinking of alternatives but may need assistance with coming up with solutions that are more realistic and plausible. Adolescents tend to create an idealistic worldview. When a traumatic event occurs they are more prone to depression and feelings of isolation when their idealistic worldview is shattered.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS:

- 1) **TEMPERAMENT OF THE CHILD** – activity level, social level, average communication skills, and positive responsiveness to others. Children who are more active may need extra attention.
- 2) **FAMILIES AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT** – the presence of some caring adult who takes responsibility for the child, particularly the presence of warmth, general harmony, and security in times of stress. Ongoing conflict at home is particularly problematic for children who are trying to resolve a traumatic experience. While over-protectiveness is not helpful, children may benefit from extra parental supervision to re-establish their sense of security.
- 3) **EXTERNAL SUPPORT** – the presence of an external support person who encourages the individual's strengths, determination, and belief systems. Be sure to utilize the support available in your community, teachers, clergy, etc.

WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE

- Child withdraws from usual activities for an extended period of time
- Significant physical and emotional symptoms that persist longer than four weeks
- Child voices suicidal thoughts, fantasies, or planning
- Child persists with aggressive acting-out behaviors that do not respond to parent intervention
- Intense family conflict
- Ongoing drop in academic performance and participation in activities with other children

WHERE TO SEEK ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE:

- Licensed child psychologist
- Your Employee Assistance Unit
- Your HMO Insurance Carrier
- Clergy or Place of Worship-Related Support System

This is by no means a comprehensive list but hopefully will be of assistance to parents during difficult times. All opinions expressed here represent our own and no organization we may be affiliated with.

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