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The information and techniques offered in this excerpt should not be used as a replacement for guidance, consultation, assessment or treatment by a qualified mental health professional.

Strategies for Coping with Trauma, Tragedy, War and Violence

Terrorism, war, school shootings and kidnapping of innocent children have unleashed anxiety about our “worst fears” coming true. Many adults have been deeply troubled by these events and have had difficulty understanding and coping with them. Children are less able, as a rule, to make sense of violent events and to cope with them than are adults. It is important to keep in mind that reactions to trauma are a *process*, not an event, and may manifest in different ways over time.

How can you help your child cope with trauma, disasters, tragedies and terrorism in today’s society? How can you help them understand the violence in the world? How can you keep your child safe in this day and age? How much should you tell them about the dangers of the world and how to fend for themselves?

The following are some **Do’s and Don’ts** that parents and school personnel can use to help children cope:

Do:

- Stay calm and collected. The child will be looking to you for safety signals.
- Take time to deal with your own reactions; seek support and comfort if needed.
- Ask the child to tell you what he knows of the events; use the child’s level of understanding to steer your response.
- Encourage questions and discussion; let the child’s questions be your guide to the content of the conversation.
- Answer questions honestly and accurately, but limit information to necessary details.
- Speak to the child in terms and language that he understands at his level. Use metaphors and analogies. Young children may benefit from play or drawings.
- Acknowledge and accept the child’s fears; let him know that it is normal and natural to feel upset, worried or angry.

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- Share your own reactions (within reason), to normalize the child’s experience, but not to overburden him.
- Reassure the child that he is safe and protected. Older children and teenagers may benefit from knowing all the measures being taken to ensure their safety, whereas young children merely need to know that they are safe.
- Give children as many valid reasons as possible about why they are unlikely targets, but acknowledge, if necessary, that sometimes, bad things do happen. Some children push for guarantees about safety, and may need to know that absolute safety can neither be predicted nor guaranteed.
- Be physically and emotionally available to provide nurturing and comfort as needed.
- Make extra time to be with the child in the mornings, evenings and at bedtime, to allow opportunities for the child to express feelings and ask questions.
- Help the child distinguish between real and imagined fears.
- Teach the child how to communicate distress and to ask for help as needed.
- Use the *Feeling Thermometer* as an index of intensity and change in emotions.
- Limit exposure to graphic replays of the events; turn off the TV if necessary.
- Watch television with the child, to monitor exposure and respond to concerns.
- Avoid detailed adult discussions of the events in front of the child.
- Dispel misinformation and misconceptions; learn and share the facts.
- Model the behavior the child is expected to learn. Be aware of your own feelings and channel them appropriately.
- Teach the child that anger and conflicts are best resolved with words rather than physically or by “lashing out” inappropriately.
- Get “back to business;” resume normal family and school routines as soon as possible.
- Spend extra time doing enjoyable things with the child; provide distracting activities.
- Maintain regular bedtime schedules, but provide extra comfort if needed such as a nightlight, special toys or sitting with the child until he falls asleep.
- Express faith, hope and optimism about returning to normalcy.
- Help the child (if old enough and so inclined) to show caring and empathy for victims—to donate clothes or toys, collect money, write letters, attend a prayer service or organize a relief effort. Such actions lessen feelings of helplessness.
- Give the child opportunities to come up with ideas about how to cope or to help the victims. The child’s ideas may be very practical and creative.
- Reach for your faith, family or friends when you need support or understanding.
- Remember that any behavior is worsened by stress. If the child is prone to anxiety, expect her to be more nervous, tearful and clingy, on edge, distractible, regressed and to have nightmares, (especially if she has seen graphic pictures or stories).
- Be vigilant and anticipate signs of excessive or disproportionate distress.
- If fears or distress are severe, continue for over a month, or start to generalize, seek help from a mental health professional.

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Don't:

- Assume that there is one orderly or predictable way for the child to cope with trauma.
- Rush the child to “get over” the events; every child responds differently. Allow the child to take his time to figure things out.
- Volunteer information if the child does not seem to know about the events; instead, remain vigilant for signs of worry or distress.
- Overload the child with information. Let the child’s questions steer the conversation.
- Discuss worst-case scenarios.
- Misrepresent, distort or be dishonest about the facts.
- Burden the child with your intense feelings. The child may be overwhelmed, interpret your reactions as reason for fear, and feel responsible for taking care of you.
- Push teenagers or older children to discuss the events. Respect their wishes if they choose not to do so. Let them know you will be available if and when they are ready.
- Suppress teenage humor as a way of coping, but channel it appropriately.
- Speculate about perpetrators, motives or other details. Be honest when facts are few.
- Perpetuate or allow stereotyping of people from different subgroups, cultures or countries; the child may easily generalize these beliefs.
- Express or condone hatred or inappropriate anger. The child may find it difficult to sort through and manage intense emotions.
- Allow or condone physical expressions of anger.

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