

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN DEAL WITH TERRIFYING INCIDENTS, STORMS AND DISASTERS

When preschoolers and younger school aged children see images of or experience disasters and large scale storms, it can really frighten them. They live in a world somewhere between reality and fantasy and often have difficulty telling the difference between the two. They also have not yet developed their full understanding of mortality or whether something on television is far away or close by. I was asked this same question following the Columbine school shooting in 1999, the World Trade Center attack in 2001, and the Tsunami of 2005. Here are some guidelines for raising children when something bad happens in the world.

Limit their exposure to televised news reports on the occurrence. This is a good time to fall back on effectively managing their access to the television by limiting the amount of time they watch it. If you have to watch it yourself, coordinate it so that they are involved in another activity at that time. There are numerous university studies that reveal the high amount of violence on television and the effects it can have on children. Some of these effects include becoming less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, being more fearful in general, and an increase in aggressiveness toward others.

If they do see the news reports or hear about it from other sources, **explain it to them clearly** and honestly, and at their own development level so they will understand. Be ready to answer all of their questions and encourage your children to verbalize their worries and concerns. Look for stories where something good happened in the wake of the disaster. Most networks want to show you the gloom and doom of the event, but some will run stories where people or animals were saved and became heroes. I recall a story that ran after the Tsunami hit where a tourist reported seeing an elephant saving children from the approaching waves.

Watch for unusual behavior changes during this time. If you sense that they know about it but are not talking, the best thing to do is to create safe and loving opportunities for them to express how they are feeling. You'll have better results by asking them open ended questions that they can answer in their own words. Remain calm and don't force them to talk about it. If an unusual behavior occurs such as bedwetting, hitting, or sudden meltdowns, be patient and don't get upset. Feel free to talk with your pediatrician if necessary.

Manage your own emotions. Even if you're doing a great job at limiting the television, your children can still sense something's wrong if you are worried or your moods are being affected by the events taking place. You may need to talk with someone to ease your own fears about the disaster. If you're feeling sad and need to cry, take care of yourself by finding ways to get some alone time away from the kids. Don't hesitate to lean on family and friends or seek professional counseling if necessary. It's one thing for a child to see something scary happening, but when their "all powerful" parent is showing signs of distress, it can freak them out even more.

Fall back on your religious faith with regular prayer in your family meetings or attend special church services. You can bring attention to the victims of the tragedy and those who suffered

by lighting candles to honor those who died in the disaster. If your children are old enough or you've taught them to handle candles safely, put a large candle in the center of the table to represent God or whatever life's greater power is for you. Each family member then takes a smaller unlit candle with a drip protector on it and dips it into the larger candle to be lit. Candles with the special drip protectors are usually called "candlelight service" candles and are available at most Christian book or merchandise stores. You may even find them for purchase on the internet by doing a search on "candlelight" or "drip protector". This exercise also teaches unconditional love and will help them feel safe. By blowing out the flame of their candle to represent being frightened or not feeling good, relighting it over and over from another lit candle shows them that love is never ending. They will also see that they can get that love from God's candle in the center of the table, from mom or dad's candle, or from their siblings.

Create or revisit your family evacuation plan. Setting aside time to do this and including the children in the development process will help them feel safe. Children automatically see their parents as magical giants who have all the answers and know what to do. Putting evacuation plans in place in the event of an emergency will demonstrate this power you have and will set their minds and hearts at ease.

Get involved with an organization that is taking action to provide services and supplies to the victims of the disaster. You may find many local groups such as the American Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity International that can use volunteers for packaging and collecting supplies. Many of these efforts may allow children to participate in some fashion. When your children see you giving to help others, it models for them the spirit of giving in their own way. It helps build the moral foundation you'll want them to have as they grow.

Your children are small creatures exploring and learning about their world one step at a time. When something happens near or around them with high caliber, like a disaster or a storm, they will undoubtedly have great difficulty in understanding the causes and impacts of something of this magnitude. Be ready to comfort them and love them even more than usual. Be patient and be ready. You as their parent are the most important teacher they will ever have!

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