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Coping with Fears

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Increased family time helps children deal with emotions

The tragedy in New York City, Washington, D.C. and other cities affects children in different ways, and Peter L. Stavinoha, Ph.D., a psychologist on staff at Children's Medical Center of Dallas, stresses that the best way to help children deal with tragedies is to just be with them.

"Rather than forcing them to talk, be near them so that when they are ready to talk you are available," Stavinoha says. "This is a time for parents to listen to their children and acknowledge whatever feelings they are expressing."

It is common in a disaster situation for a child to feel a loss of control and stability. Regular routines such as family meals should be adhered to as much as possible because this helps give a sense that things remain predictable and secure at home.

"Parents need to help children put words to their feelings, Stavinoha says. "They should be ready to help their kids articulate their fears and anxieties. This helps a child feel like he or she has been understood."

Give honest, factual answers

Stavinoha says the best way to help children understand tragic events is to be honest and give factual answers to their questions, but not overwhelm them with information that they may not understand.

"Stick to answering their questions at a developmentally appropriate level while giving the child plenty of opportunities to discuss the disaster," he said. "Expect that many questions will be repetitious and redundant as children try to make sense of this. Do not deny how serious the situation is. Particularly for older children, it is important to acknowledge the significance of their reactions and anxieties."

Find support

As for parents, Stavinoha stresses acknowledging anxieties and fears raised by this disaster. They should seek support from family, friends, church or other social and emotional supports. Parents can model healthy emotional coping for their children during this time. This does not mean hiding one's feelings; rather, parents should stay aware of their reactions and show their children how they deal with this disaster in a healthy manner.

In the short term, while the national events play out, Stavinoha suggests participating in some activities that help put children and families back in control in an otherwise chaotic situation.

Attending prayer services or helping with disaster relief efforts for victims can provide a feeling of empowerment so that children are not feeling so helpless about the situation.

Following are some ways that parents can tune in to their children's emotions and help them cope with what they see or hear about a tragic event:

- Don't overexpose children to the disaster by allowing them to review the events over and over on television. "The scenes will continue to be highly disturbing to children," Stavinoha said.
- Honestly answer children's questions as the concerns surface.
- Reassure children that parents don't have all the answers either, but that the children are protected.
- Spend more family time together over dinner or at bedtime so children feel a sense of closeness and have opportunities to express anxieties.
- Watch for symptoms of fear or anxiety. Fear may affect a child's diet or ability to sleep. Fear also may cause irritability, regression into former fears, clinginess or aggressive behavior in a child.
- Children have vivid imaginations. The fears that parents feel may be greatly exaggerated in the minds of their children.
- School-aged children typically seek information from parents in bits and pieces. After an initial conversation about the tragedy, they may go off and play and then come back and ask more questions. Stavinoha suggests that parents follow the child's lead because "children will take what they can take when they can take it."
- "Hold a conversation with your child, not a one-way discussion," Stavinoha says. "Say you don't know why it happened either, but that you will find out together."
- Children take cues from parents. Parents will want to be careful how they respond to difficult news. This does not mean hiding one's feelings; rather, parents should stay aware of their reactions and show their children how they deal with this disaster in a healthy manner.
- Another way to help children cope is to get the family involved in a positive activity in memory of victims and in support of survivors and family members of victims. Families can attend faith services or get involved in relief efforts.