

Traumatic Events, the Media and Your Child

Television, radio, and the Internet bring horrific events into our homes with great speed and ease. As a result of advances in media communication families are now exposed to trauma that they are otherwise unlikely to experience directly in the course of their daily lives. Everyone is now affected when disasters happen. As adults, we often have trouble dealing with this ourselves. Yet as parents we must also help our children to understand and cope with what they see and hear about traumatic events through the media. This parenting guide is designed to assist with this task. First we look at what the research tells us about the effects of media reports of traumatic events on children. Then we give some ideas to help you take care of your child in the case of such events.

Children watch TV news broadcasts.

A study reported by the Australian Broadcasting Authority found that nine out of ten primary school children surveyed said they watched television. Nearly two thirds watched every day. Almost all of the children said they watched the news. The children were asked what was acceptable to see and hear on the news. It is not surprising that many children didn't like stories about children and animals being hurt. There were differences in the concerns of boys and girls about news coverage; boys were more likely than girls to find most news events acceptable.

Viewing disastrous events can lead to more worry and stress in children.

Extensive viewing of distressing footage can have a negative impact on children.

A survey conducted in the United States following the September 11 tragedy showed that about a third of children had some symptoms of stress and nearly half were worried about safety. However, not all children react in the same way to traumatic events they see in the media.

- The severity of a child's reaction to an event seen on TV is usually related to the amount



of direct exposure to the event. The effect is generally greater if the child witnesses an event, or knows someone who was injured. A child who has previously been a victim of trauma, or has had previous mental health problems may also experience a more severe reaction.

- For children who are affected, reactions might be immediate (occurring straight after the event) or delayed (occurring weeks or even months later).
- For children who are seriously affected, reactions might include bedwetting, thumb sucking, nightmares and withdrawal. Other changes in behaviour could also occur. Children might start to behave in ways that are considered stubborn, disobedient, helpless, irritable, hyperactive or aggressive. A child might decrease concentration, increase fantasy play, change eating habits, or abandon chores or homework. They might also be preoccupied with traumatic themes or feel anxious about safety and danger in their immediate environment.
- Images (such as television pictures of people jumping to their death from a burning building) are more likely to cause reactions than hearing about what happened.

The way children react depends on their age.

- Infants and toddlers are unable to understand the impact of a disaster, but recognise and respond to the emotional and behavioural changes in adults around them. They are likely to attribute these changes to themselves or others in their environment rather than to the traumatic event.
- Preschool children can be upset by what they see on TV. Children of this age think images on screen are occurring in real time. They sometimes think an event is happening again and again when it is replayed on TV.

They may ask lots of questions because they are feeling anxious, they may keep their feelings hidden, or transfer them onto other daily issues. What's more, preschoolers' understanding of tragic events is not complete because they do not understand the permanence of death. If preschoolers see adults upset in response to traumatic events screened on TV, they are likely to think the events are taking place in their immediate environment.

- Primary school-aged children have more understanding about the significance of the traumatic event and its timing. The images on TV may frighten them and they may become concerned for their own safety and the safety of those close to them. Although primary school children have a reasonable understanding of the event, they may be confused about the details they hear from different sources. Often children of this age are unable to differentiate between events that happen a long way away, or in another country, from those that are on their doorstep. Therefore, they may worry about the impact the event will have on their own lives.
- Adolescents generally have greater capacity to understand the event, its causes and consequences. Viewing such events can lead to a variety of responses including anger, desire for revenge, worry and despair. They may develop sleeping or eating problems. Sometimes they are unsure about how they should respond. They may want to know how other people are responding, and may be keen to discuss their opinions, or try to offer assistance.

Media reports of traumatic events can also have positive effects.

According to Dr Jessica Hamblen from the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the United States, media coverage provides much needed information related to the seriousness of a situation, safety issues, and help for victims. The media can also present images of hope, resilience and courage. Images of people being rescued and public support for those affected are positive aspects that children can gain from the media.



Ideas

The following suggestions are based on research about children's responses to media representations of trauma and what is known generally about helping children through trauma.

Look after yourself.

At times of severe stress, children will be affected by how the adults around them behave. Therefore, it makes sense to attend to your own needs for reassurance and comfort, following a distressing event. You can help your child cope by showing how you have learnt to cope yourself.

Comfort your child.

Experts agree that it is important for children to be told that their parents and others will love and protect them during difficult times.

- Comfort your child and give frequent assurance of safety and security. However, do not give school-aged children false assurance. For example, do not promise that such events will never happen again; they usually will not believe you. Explain how you will keep them safe and guard against such things happening to them.
- Spend more time communicating with your children so they have more opportunities to let you know what is on their minds. A trauma may also stimulate all sorts of other thoughts, questions and concerns not directly related to it. Try to ensure that you can do some extra enjoyable activities together to put it all back into the perspective of normal life.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime if they have trouble going to sleep. Let them know where you will be while they are asleep. If necessary, let your child sleep with a light on, if this is reassuring for them. However, think about these suggestions as short-term strategies only. Plan to return gradually to the normal bedtime routine.
- As much as possible keep to normal routines and activities around sleeping, eating, and regular activities. Routines are particularly comforting for young children.
- Immediately after a traumatic event, try to avoid unnecessary separation of your child from the family.

Deal with feelings.

According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, emotional reactions may include sadness, fear and relief. These emotional states may come and go. It is important to let your child know that such feelings are OK.

- Encourage your child to express feelings and worries however they wish. This may be through talking, playing or drawing.
- Listen to and acknowledge your child's worries and let them know it is normal to feel sad or upset. Let them know that you also get frightened or worried. Do not criticise their concerns or feelings by saying something like 'Don't be silly'.
- Let your child know how you are feeling. However, it is also important to communicate how you are coping with these feelings.
- If you are feeling very upset and a calm discussion is not possible, discuss your reactions with your child when you are feeling more composed. Tell your child you are feeling sad, and will talk to them a bit later on when you are feeling better.

Teach your child how to cope.

As well as providing positive examples by our own behaviour, the way in which we talk to our children about distressing circumstances can teach them a lot about how to cope with negative things that happen in the world.

- Do not force discussion of a traumatic event. If your child is unwilling to talk, don't worry. There may be occasions later on when they want to talk.
- Try not to make the discussion too detailed. Children often are happy with a few ideas, and will come back for more detail later rather than work it all out at once.
- If your child wants to discuss a disaster, check on their understanding of what they have seen and heard. Ask them what they know about it, why they think it is happening and how it is related to them, and then use this as the basis for your discussion. Sometimes what they are concerned about is not what you might expect. Use words and concepts they understand.
- When your child is ready and willing to talk about a disturbing event, use this as an opportunity to teach coping strategies.

- Answer any questions your child has simply, honestly and openly. Try not to give more information than is asked for, and do not dwell on scary details. However, don't soften information with terms that may confuse a young child (such as 'go to sleep' instead of 'die'). If you show children that you accept death as a part of life, so will they.
- When talking about traumatic events, give children simple, factual information. Avoid talking in images that can take hold of their imagination. For example, you can say to a younger child, 'Some men crashed a plane into a big building and it fell down and lots of people died' instead of describing in detail how it happened and how they were killed.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you can't answer all their questions. Tell your children that you will see if you can find out and tell them later (even if you just need some time to think about what you should say to them).
- With an older child, the occasion may be used to learn about issues such as terrorism, violence, war or disaster. Discussions could explore ideas for positive solutions to such problems.
- Try not to focus on blame. Help your child avoid blaming any person or group of people.
- Point out how rare such events are, and how people dealt with them in the past.
- Inform your child that the media are more likely to report 'bad news' stories than 'good news' stories. Remind them that many positive things happen in the world that are not shown on TV or mentioned in the newspapers.
- Focus on the images of hope, courage and resilience that are presented in the media. Teach your child that good things can come out of disastrous events (e.g. donations, volunteers, communities uniting and heroic actions).

Monitor your child's exposure to trauma.

Media representation of traumatic events can have damaging effects on children. Therefore it is reasonable to monitor carefully what your child is exposed to at these times.

- Consider having the TV in a shared area of the house so that you can check on what your child is watching. Be aware that radio reports can also be upsetting to children.

- Find out when graphic news coverage of a recent traumatic event is to be screened on TV. Restrict the viewing of a younger child where possible. Lee Burton of the Australian Children's Television Foundation recommends that children under the age of seven or eight should not watch the news. If your older child wants to watch the news about the events it would be a good idea to watch together. These suggestions also apply to radio news and coverage.
- After a traumatic event occurs it is tempting to leave the TV or radio station on all day to catch up with the latest developments. This means that your child could be accidentally exposed to material that will worry or frighten them. If you like 'background noise' consider playing music instead. Plan to watch or listen to news updates when your child is not around.
- Try not to leave newspapers with distressing photographs in places where young children can look at them. With older children, discuss the photographs with them if they wish to, and then put the newspaper away.
- Don't forget that children pass on news to each other when adults are not around. Even preschool children chat about what they have heard. Ask your child about what they have heard from others and discuss it, otherwise they are likely to accept distorted rumours they have heard from peers.

You may also need to monitor your child's reactions. Look out for ongoing physical signs, sleep troubles, worries or fears that suggest your child could benefit from professional help. Here are signs that indicate a need for more help if you notice that they are occurring over an extended period of time:

- Not wanting to attend school or changes in your child's performance at school.
- Fear of being alone or in the dark, or showing increased sensitivity to sounds.
- Unexplained or vague physical pain symptoms, (such as headaches, stomach aches, or general aches and pains).
- Going back to an earlier stage of behaviour. For example, young children may cling to parents or teachers or resist leaving a place where they feel safe.
- Engaging in high-risk activities (such as substance abuse).
- Any other emotional or behavioural change that dates from the time of the trauma.



Pitfalls

Here are some tips for dealing with issues or questions that might arise when you try some of the strategies recommended above.

How far should I go in censoring what I say about the traumatic event? It is natural when you are talking to other adults to express your feelings of anger, hopelessness, distrust etc. When you are with your partner or adult friends you may be likely to explore your fears and concerns at a deeper level. Be aware that your children may overhear you. Remember that when important things are happening children will want to know what is going on and will tune into adult talk. You may not want your child to hear the full extent of your fears and concerns. If this is the case, defer your adult discussion to a time when the children are not able to listen in. Also bear in mind that if they hear part, but not all, of your discussion they may get a distorted impression.

How can I help my child if I am not coping very well myself? Tell them you are sad for the people who have been hurt, or that it reminds you of things in the past. Reassure them that the family is not in any danger, that everything is all right, and that you will feel better soon. Check out some of the suggestions in the article by Rob Gordon and Ruth Wraith mentioned in the Help section of this guide. If you are still having difficulties coping yourself, it may be wise to seek professional help.

What if my child doesn't seem to care about the event? Don't worry if your child is not interested or concerned about the event—they may just want to play. Sometimes children do not talk about their feelings, even when parents ask them to. However, keep the lines of communication open in case they want to discuss things later on. They often drop hints or make casual comments that can be responded to. With young children, briefly reassure them that you are going to make sure they are safe, even if they do not seek this reassurance.



Help

There is a large amount of information on the Internet about coping with disaster. It is not surprising that government departments and health agencies in the United States developed many of these resources after the events of September 11. If you do not have access to the

Internet at home or work there are places in your community that provide public access. Your child's school, your local library or community house may be able to help you get hold of this information.

Advice is available if you are having difficulties coping yourself.

- **Victorian Government Department of Human Services:** <http://hna.ffh.vic.gov>. The article by Dr Rob Gordon and Ruth Wraith is a good guide for adults who are feeling overwhelmed by traumatic events. Click on the link to 'Bali incident', then click on 'Stress After Emergencies'.

If your child has been involved directly in a disaster or trauma, or is severely affected by media representations of traumatic events, here is a list of organisations and websites that may be helpful.

- **Disaster and coping:** www.criminology.unimelb.edu.au/ptsd/disaster.html. This site has several self-help sheets on dealing with disasters and a list of Australian help agencies.
- **The Child Trauma Academy:** www.childtrauma.org. The Child Trauma Academy focuses on services, training and research in the area of child maltreatment. Their website has information for parents and professionals about research and recommendations regarding children and trauma.
- **The United States Department of Health and Human Services SAMHSA's National Health Information Center:** www.mentalhealth.org. This website has a variety of publications related to dealing with disasters.
- **American Psychological Association:** www.helping.apa.org/daily. The section of the association's website titled 'Psychology in Daily Life' has extensive guidelines about dealing with trauma and disaster and helping children involved in these events.
- **The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies:** <http://www.istss.org>. The ISTSS is a professional association for those treating and researching post traumatic stress. Their website has an extensive range of resource material and handouts for various situations, including information about children and adolescents.

- **The National Mental Health Association:** www.disastertraining.org/resources.html. This US website has information and resources about helping children involved in disasters, floods, fires, hurricanes, tornados and earthquakes, as well as references and links to other sites.
- **National Institute of Mental Health:** www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm. This site contains a useful document 'Helping children and adolescents cope with violence and disasters'. The document provides information about how children react to trauma and how to help children cope with the consequences.
- **National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:** www.ncptsd.org/facts/specific/fs_children.html. This website provides information about the development, causes, and characteristics of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and how to treat people with PTSD.
- **Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health and Ageing, Mental Health and Special Programs Branch:** www.mentalhealth.gov.au. This website has links to state services for survivors of torture and trauma – See Special Access Services.

If you wish to obtain further help for your child, the following organisations and people may be able to assist:

- **Parentline:** For confidential advice phone 13 22 89.
- **Kids Help line:** Phone 1800 55 1800. A National 24 hour telephone counselling service for children and young people in Australia.
- **Regional Parenting Resource Services:** Contact Parentline for information about the nearest resource centre to you.
- Your local doctor.
- Psychologists/counsellors who specialise in children's issues. The Australian Psychological Society has a free referral service: www.psychsociety.com.au/
- The student welfare coordinator at your school.
- A community mental health centre near you.



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