

Responding to scary events: Teaching children through our own actions

Dave Riley, Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin-Madison / Extension

Sometimes events in the world of adults can affect children, events like war or the death of a public figure. But children don't have an automatic reaction to those events. They watch us adults to learn how to appraise the meaning of the events, and how they ought to react.

For example, following the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by American terrorists, children who watched great amounts of TV coverage for the next 6 weeks were far more likely to develop a "post traumatic stress disorder." These were not children who knew anyone injured by the bombing. These children were harmed not by the bombing, but by the TV news and their parents' reactions to the news. The same thing happened following the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York, and in the build-up to the war in Iraq.

Children do not have an automatic fear response to things like news reports of terrorist bombings or war. They look primarily to the adults around them for cues on which emotional response to adopt (we call this "social referencing" or "emotional contagion"). If their parents and child care teachers are calm, then children will respond calmly also. The simple act of monitoring your own emotional response to events will prevent many of the problems of stress disorder we see in children.

Background: Social cues for emotional response

Many research studies confirm that social cues are key to many of our emotional responses. This is different from most peoples' viewpoint that emotional responses are automatic, unlearned responses to events. Not so.

A well-known psychology experiment first demonstrated this idea about 40 years ago. Dr. Stanley Schachter told subjects in his experiment that he was testing the effect of a powerful vitamin on vision. But in reality the pill he gave them was a stimulant that aroused their nervous systems so they were wide-awake and full of energy. (Since his subjects were not fully informed, this study would be stopped as unethical today.) Half the subjects waited in a room with a person who was angry about filling out a form, while the other half waited with a person who acted playful and happy.

When Dr. Schachter tested the emotional response of his subjects he found that the drug caused the first group to become very fearful, while the second group (who received the same drug) had become extremely happy. In other words, they experienced the same physiological arousal from the drug, but interpreted it in opposite ways, depending upon the social cues they received.

An EEO/Affirmative Action employer, University of Wisconsin Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.

The subjects of these studies were adults, but we are all like this. Children are especially prone to emotional cues from others, because they have less experience in life and therefore fewer habitual patterns of emotional response. Researchers have demonstrated that children's emotional responses to ambiguous events, in particular, are strongly influenced by the reactions of adults around them.

Reactions to TV news

Think back to our recent wars in Iraq, or the attack on the World Trade Center. Many young children experienced unhealthy levels of fear during these periods, becoming emotionally distraught, sleepless, regressing to less mature behavior, or clinging to their parents and teachers. If a child had a loved one in the conflict, then this fear made good sense. But for most children, their fears were irrational, unhealthy, and unnecessary.

The most startling thing about their fears is that the TV reports showed nothing that was scary. Certainly no people being injured or killed were shown on TV, unlike most of our usual TV fare. So what frightened the children? In some cases they were scared by scenes of children crying as their parents shipped off for war. This is a truly frightening sight to any child. In most cases they were scared by the tension and uncertainty they observed as their own teachers and parents watched the news.

When we ignore the everyday violence of their TV shows, children easily learn to consider it normal (this is a separate problem). In contrast, when we turn the volume up and obsessively watch the news reports with worried brows, then children get worried too.

Many emotional reactions are learned habits

Think for a moment of the pro athletes you see on TV. When one of them is called for a foul, he whines at the umpire. In the same situation, another player mutters angrily at himself, while a third remains calm or intense, and another might even smile at his or her mistake. Each of them believes their emotional response is a natural (unlearned) reaction to frustration.

They are wrong. In fact, each has developed a habitual pattern of emotional response to this situation, so their reaction is certainly automatic, but not inevitable or natural. It is a learned habit, which they could un-learn if they wanted. The player who keeps calm and focused is using "emotional self-regulation." Such players may not be in control of events, but they are in control of their reactions to those events.

Seen in this light, every frustrating or scary event in a child's life is an opportunity to teach them *emotional self-control* and a healthy style of coping. Some pro athletes learn an immature response to frustration, while others learn a mature, self-responsible response. Similarly, we can teach our children to fall apart emotionally at life's changes, or we can teach them calmness in the face of unsettling events. We teach this primarily through our own example (modeling) and by coaching their healthy coping responses.

An EEO/Affirmative Action employer, University of Wisconsin Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.

References.

- Feinman, S. (1992). *Social referencing and the social construction of reality in infancy*. New York: Plenum.
- Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J.T., & Rapson, R.L. (1993). Emotional contagion. *Current Directions in Orthopsychiatry*, 74, 26-32.
- Power, T.G. (2004). Stress and coping in childhood: The parents' role. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 4, 271-317.
- Prinstein, M.J., LaGreca, A.M., Vernberg, E.M., & Silverman, W.K. (1996). Children's coping assistance: How parents, teachers, and friends help children cope after a natural disaster. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 25, 463-475.
- Schachter, S. (1964). The interaction of cognitive and physiological determinants of emotional state. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 1, p. 49-81. New York: Academic Press.