

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 natural disasters (flood, tornado, hurricane), or the buildup to a war, or the death of a public figure. Sometimes children experience these events directly, as in a flood, and other times they experience them indirectly through television coverage. 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 in 1995, 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 (in 2001), and in the build-up to recent wars in Iraq (in 1991 and 2002).

Children do not have an automatic fear response to things like news reports of terrorist bombings hurricane flooding. Even with events they experience, such as a community-wide electrical outage, children 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.

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 children to fall apart emotionally at life's challenges, or we can teach them calmness and courage in the face of unsettling events. We teach this primarily through our own example (modeling) and by coaching their healthy coping responses.

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.

Talking with Children about Disasters:
*Age differences in children's understanding of
TV content.*

Dr. Dave Riley
University of Wisconsin-Madison / Extension

For preschool aged children (0 – 5) “seeing is believing,” and fantasy can seem real. For example, preschoolers believe that dreams are real (they believe you could have seen the dream if you had been in the room), and they can sometimes be frightened by a picture of a bee in a children’s picture book, really believing the bee might sting. They will be affected most by vivid images and startling, emotional sounds (for example, by pictures of children crying as their parents leave for war, or pictures and sound of injured people after a tidal wave). Think about it this way: whatever they see on TV, they may believe is happening right now in their world. When the video of the jet crashing into the Twin Trade Towers was replayed over and over again, some young children believed it was happening over and over again (which *would* be very frightening).

School aged children (6-12) can understand that events are real but taking place elsewhere. But they often relate the events to their own lives. They may want to know if any children were hurt, or if any children lost their parents. They are unlikely to understand the adult political issues (who is at war and why), but will be most concerned with their own family’s continuing safety.

Teenagers can be frightened by many of the same things as younger children, but may also have two new kinds of concerns. First, they may be more worried about the future (not just the present) safety of themselves and their families. Second, they may have serious concerns about the larger meaning of the disaster. For example, they may ask Why can’t governments settle their differences without wars? Why does God allow such disasters?

ALL CHILDREN will look to their parents to know how to respond to televised images of the war. If you become frightened or depressed, so will your children. If you avoid becoming obsessed with the news, and if you show courage in the face of hard news, then your child will learn this too.

ALL CHILDREN (and all adults too) will be less frightened if they see less TV. This is true during normal times as well as following disasters, and many research studies have shown this. One study following the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma found that children who watched lots of TV coverage of the bombing were far more likely to develop a “stress disorder.” Even in normal times, the more TV an adult watches, the more they over-estimate how dangerous their community is. This is because TV over-emphasizes crime and violence.

(Some of this information is from a good book by University of Wisconsin Professor Joanne Cantor: “*Mommy I’m Scared*”: *How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them.*)

Talking with Children about Disasters:
*How Children of Different Ages
Show Anxiety and Stress.*

Dr. Julie Poehlmann & Dr. Dave Riley
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sometimes children can talk about their worries, but this is not typical for most young children, or even for some adolescents. Children often show their concerns and stress level through changes in their normal behaviors.

Infants may pick up on the feelings of worry of their parents and siblings, without understanding the reason for the worries. Infants can show stress through changes in sleeping or eating patterns, decreased attention span, or increased fussiness or clinginess.

Parents can help by addressing their own feelings of worry and by maintaining the baby's normal routines. Extra play time and comforting also help.

Young children are sensitive to parental stress levels. They might cling more to adults and fear being left alone. They can have eating or sleeping problems, nightmares, increased sensitivity to stimulation (like loud noises), or feelings of upset if their routine changes. Preschoolers might regress back to thumb sucking, daytime accidents or bed wetting, or complain about aches and pains. They may communicate their worries by acting out or showing an irritable mood.

These levels of stress can be addressed by parents who can talk with and reassure the child. Spend extra time playing with your child, and maintain the child's normal routines. Seek professional assistance if the child shows excessive withdrawal, acting out, or does not respond to special attention.

School aged children who are stressed might also cling more to parents, although this may show as increased competition with siblings for the parents' attention. They may have nightmares, appetite disturbance, irritable or sad mood, increased bodily complaints, and can become either more withdrawn or more aggressive. They may show poor concentration on tasks like schoolwork. They are sensitive to parental stress levels but also to the feelings and information they are exposed to in other settings, such as school. They may have many questions but not know how to begin a conversation with adults about issues related to a natural or man-made disaster.

These levels of stress can be addressed by parents who can talk with and reassure the child. Giving children the opportunity to ask questions in a safe and

--continued over--

supportive manner is helpful. Parents can maintain routines and spend extra time in activities with the child. Seek professional assistance if the child shows excessive

withdrawal, acting out, preoccupation with death or violence, or does not respond to special attention.

Adolescents, like younger children, can have sleep or appetite disturbances and can show poor concentration. In response to stress, they also sometimes show physical problems like head and stomach aches, or even bowel problems or rashes.

These levels of stress can be addressed by parents who can talk with and reassure the teenager. Seek professional assistance if the child becomes disoriented, has memory gaps, is severely depressed or withdrawn, cannot make simple decisions, or is preoccupied with one thought.

(Some of this material comes from a web site on “Helping Children Cope with Stress” by Dr. Karen DeBord of the University of North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service:
<http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cope.stress.html> .

How to Talk with Children about Disasters (or other concerns).

Dr. Dave Riley
University of Wisconsin-Madison / Extension

- ❖ Often children are hesitant to share their fears or questions with adults. You need to *create an opening* for the child to talk. You can use a question like “What have you heard about the bombing?” or “How do you feel about what has happened to our neighborhood?”
- ❖ Then *the key is to LISTEN*. Avoid giving them a lecture on your views. To begin with, avoid even correcting their misinformation. Instead, listen to the feelings behind the child’s words, and respond to those feelings: “Sounds like you’re worried” or “This is a bit scary, isn’t it” or “All this stuff is a bit confusing, yeah?”
- ❖ Avoid belittling a child’s concerns, no matter how illogical or silly they may seem. Try to accept and *validate the child’s feelings* (“A lot of people feel that way.”) Help the child clarify how he/she feels. “That’s interesting, can you tell me more about that?” “What exactly do you mean by that?”
- ❖ *Avoid burdening a young child with your own feelings*. But some sharing of your feelings can be reassuring to an adolescent (“You seem [sad, angry, worried, etc.] about this, and I find myself feeling that way too”). Just be sure that *your* feelings and needs don’t become the center of attention.
- ❖ After you are well into the conversation, and know what the child thinks and feels, then you can *provide any needed information*, or correct misinformation. “The sheriff says our house is fine, and we can return to it by Friday.” Or “By the way, Iraq doesn’t have any planes or missiles that can bomb us. We are safe here.”
- ❖ With young children, sometimes the most important thing you can say is simply to *reassure your child* that you won’t let anything bad happen to them or your family. They want reassurance, and you can give it to them. You can also use more than words: hold and hug your child.
- ❖ With older children and adolescents: You are a lucky parent if your child asks one of the tough questions, like “Why do people do this?” or “Why does God allow this?” *You now have an opportunity* to help your child think about values. We recommend you avoid the simplistic answers that shut off thinking and lead to greater hatred or prejudice against whole groups of people (a simplistic answer might be “Because we are good and they are bad.”) Instead, try to acknowledge the different points of view that well-meaning people have, how people can have such different viewpoints, and our options for settling differences.
- ❖ “Talking about it” usually helps, but can sometimes make matters worse. For example, after Hurricane Andrew in Florida (1992), group discussion sessions held at their schools made some children more anxious, less able to cope, when they were forced to listen to a more distraught peer. One-on-one discussions with a trusted adult are a far safer bet.

(These suggestions are drawn, in part, from an excellent web site maintained by Educators for Social Responsibility: www.esrnational.org/guide.htm)

Talking with Children about Disasters:
***7 Things You Can Do to Reduce
Children's Fears about Disasters.***

Dr. Dave Riley
University of Wisconsin-Madison / Extension

1. **Turn off the TV news.** Really, we aren't kidding. This is probably the easiest and most effective thing you can do.
2. **Maintain your routines.** Routines are reassuring for all of us, but especially for younger children. So keep the bedtime routine, don't give up on soccer practice, have dinner at the usual time.
3. **Focus on your relationships.** Hold and cuddle your children more. Spend more time together and really give them your attention and warmth. With preschoolers, make sure you aren't late to pick them up (in stressful times they will fear separation more). If you are repairing the roof after a tornado, you might be tempted to park the kids with a neighbor while you drive to the hardware store; instead, take the whole family to the hardware store together. Following a flood or hurricane, don't make the kids sleep by themselves in the dark; instead, lay blankets or sleeping bags out in the living room and have the whole family sleep together. These small steps will really help.
4. **Model a calm emotional response to events.** Children look to their parents to know how to respond to televised images of disaster. If you become frightened or depressed, so will your children. If you avoid becoming obsessed with the news, and if you show courage in the face of hard news, then your child will learn this too.
5. **Encourage communication.** (See other handout.) Create openings for your child to talk about his/her understandings and feelings. Listen and validate their feelings. Help them clarify exactly what they know and feel.
6. **Allow young children to gain understanding through play.** In the same way that young children count on their fingers because they can't count mentally, they may try to understand social disasters like war or natural disasters like a flood through their actions –through play– rather than mentally. So don't be surprised if they play act parts of a disaster they have lived through or viewed on TV. But instead of letting them re-enact the same scene over and over, we suggest you help them expand the play. "Let's get out the blocks and build a new house for the teddy bears." "Can we set up a hospital to fix the wounded soldiers?"
7. **Find meaning through action.** By acting on our beliefs, we can avoid the feeling of lack of control in our lives. Adolescents in particular may have beliefs that need matching actions. This is actually an opportunity for positive development. For example, a study of the great depression of the 1930's found that 10-12 year olds whose families were hard hit by the depression actually did better in life than those whose family incomes were maintained. The reason was that these young people were old enough to do helpful things for their families, like getting jobs, and this helped them grow. Think of age-appropriate activities related to the disaster.