

Responding to Scary Events: Teaching Children Through Our Own Actions

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A terrorist attack, tornado, or a flooded town can affect children. But children don't have an automatic reaction to those events. They watch adults to learn about the meaning of the events and how to react.

Following the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by American terrorists, children who watched great amounts of TV coverage for the next six weeks were far more likely to develop a "post traumatic stress disorder." These children didn't know 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 build-up to the war in Iraq.

Children do not have an automatic fear response to news reports of war or natural disasters. They look to the adults around them for cues on which emotional response to adopt. This is called "social referencing" or "emotional contagion." If parents and other caregivers are calm, children will also respond

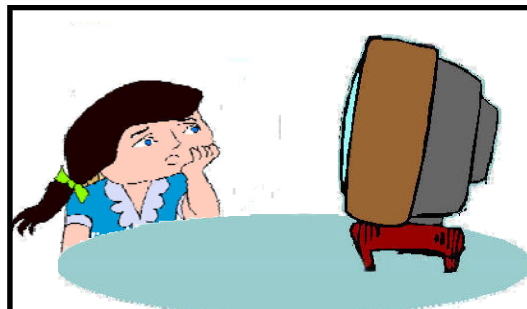
calmly. Monitoring your own emotional response to events will prevent many of the problems of stress disorder seen in children.

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 demonstrated this idea about 40 years ago. Dr. Stanley Schachter told subjects he was testing the effect of a powerful vitamin on vision. 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. The first



group became fearful, while the second group was 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.

These subjects were adults. Yet, children are also prone to emotional cues from others because they have less life experience and fewer habitual patterns of emotional response. Children's emotional responses 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 caregivers. If a child had a loved one in the conflict, then this fear made good sense. But for many children, their fears were irrational, unhealthy, and unnecessary.

The most startling thing about children's fears is that the TV reports showed nothing scary. No people were shown being injured or killed 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 parents and caregivers watched the news. When we turn the volume up and obsessively watch the news reports with worried brows, our children get worried too.

Many Emotional Reactions are Learned Habits

Think for a moment of the pro-athletes on TV. When a foul is called, one might whine at the umpire, another mutters angrily, a third remains calm, and still another might smile at the mistake. Each believes their emotional response is a natural (unlearned) reaction to frustration. They are wrong. Each athlete has developed a habitual response to this situation, so the reaction is certainly automatic, but not inevitable or natural. It is a learned response. 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 *emotional self-control* and a healthy style of coping. Some professional-athletes learn an immature response to frustration, while others learn a mature, self-responsible response. 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 by modeling and coaching healthy coping responses.

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