



Joan E. LeFebvre
Family Living Agent

Parenting the Preschooler

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Talking with Children When the Talking Gets Tough

Wars, school shootings, natural disasters, and other tragedies are a regular occurrence in the world today. Of course, we hope that these and other tragic events will never happen to anyone, especially those we care most about. Unfortunately, children today live in a media rich world and are increasingly bombarded by news stories about such terrible/horrific events. Just hearing about such events can be unsettling to children and can create feelings of distress and fear. This issue of Parenting the Preschooler offers some suggestions about what parents and other concerned adults might do to protect children and help them cope when such stories fill the airways and the heads of our children?

- ▶ **Don't assume that the kids don't know about it.** They probably know more than you think. The reality of today's world is that news travels far and wide. Adults and children learn about disasters and tragedies shortly after they occur, and live video footage with close-ups and interviews are part of the report. Children and youth are exposed to the events as soon as they can watch TV or interact with others who are consumers of the news. Not talking about it does not protect children. In fact, you may communicate

that the subject is taboo and that you are unavailable if you remain silent.

- ▶ **Reduce children's exposure to media coverage when possible.** Children's don't need to hear the gory details. It is okay to turn off the radio or TV so that they don't have to once again hear details of some tragic event.
- ▶ **Be available and "askable."** Let kids know that it is okay to talk about the unpleasant events. Ask them about what they are thinking and feeling and then listen carefully. By listening, you can find out if they have misunderstandings, and you can learn more about the support that they need. You do not need to explain more than they are ready to hear, but be willing to answer their questions.
- ▶ **Share your feelings.** Tell young people if you feel afraid, angry, or frustrated. It can help them to know that others also are upset by the events. They might feel that only children are struggling. If you tell them about your feelings, you also can tell them about how you deal with the feelings. Be careful not to overwhelm them or expect them to find answers for you.

- ▶ **Help children use creative outlets like art and music to express their feelings.** Young children may not be comfortable or skilled with words, especially in relation to difficult situations. Using art, puppets, music, or books might help children open up about their reactions. They may want to draw pictures and then destroy them, or they might want to display them or send them to someone else. Be flexible and listen.
- ▶ **Reassure young people and help them feel safe.** When tragic events occur, children may be afraid that the same will happen to them. It is important to let them know that they are not at risk — if they are not. Try to be realistic as you reassure them, however. You can try to support them and protect them, but you can not keep all bad things from happening to children. You can always tell them that you love them, though. You can say that, no matter what happens, your love will be with them. That is realistic, and often that is all the children need to feel better.
- ▶ **Support children's concern for people they do not know.** Children often are afraid not only for themselves, but also for people they do not even know. They learn that many people are getting hurt or are experiencing pain in some way. They worry about those people and their well being. In some cases they might feel less secure or cared for themselves if they see that others are hurting. It is heartwarming and satisfying to observe this level of caring in children. Explore concrete ways to help others and ease the pain.
- ▶ **Look for feelings beyond fear.** After reassuring kids, don't stop there. Studies have shown that children also may feel sad

or angry. Let them express that full range of emotions. Support the development of caring and empathy. Be careful not to encourage the kind of response given by one child: "I don't care if there's a war, as long as it doesn't affect me and my family."

- ▶ **Help children and youth find a course of action.** One important way to reduce stress is to take action. This is true for both adults and children. The action may be very simple or more complex. Children may want to write a letter to someone about their feelings, get involved in an organization committed to preventing events like the one they are dealing with, or send money to help victims. Let the young people help to identify the action choices. They may have wonderful ideas.
- ▶ **Take action and get involved in something.** It is not enough to let children take action by themselves. Children who know that their parents, teachers, or other significant caregivers are working to make a difference feel hope. They feel safer and more positive about the future. So do something. It will make you feel more hopeful, too. And hope is one of the most valuable gifts we can give children and ourselves.

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PAREDOC@cets.extension.umn.edu (list serve)
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Author: Judith A. Myers-Walls, Extension Specialist, Purdue University
 Reviewer: Steve Small, Extension Specialist, Family Life, UW-Madison
 Layout: Penny Otte, Program Assistant I, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting the Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
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