Guidelines for helping children deal with frightening events and media coverage

The extensive media coverage of violence, conflict, terror, etc in the international community, and here in Australia, means that many children will be aware of world events and the possibility of violence close to home.

Hearing about these events can be very disturbing and distressing for children.

Children often cannot easily understand time and place. They may experience events as concrete and local and profoundly personal and emotional, and wonder if harm would happen to them.

They can easily think that everyone and everything, everywhere, is coming apart, particularly if the way adults are behaving gives them that impression.

Children need reassurance that they are safe and secure, as well as help in making sense of complex events, at a level that they can understand.

Signs that children are feeling distressed

Children are not always able to express complex feelings in the same direct way that adults do, and therefore might not show the same reactions to stress as adults. It is therefore very important to look out for changes in children’s behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed, such as:

- Changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- Regressive behaviour - children behaving younger than they normally do
- Nightmares
- Anxiety about sleeping alone
- Trouble getting to sleep
- Irritability or anger
- Tantrums, increased defiance
- Fussy eating
- Withdrawing
- Wanting to stay close to a parent, becoming more clingy
- Decreased concentration or attention span
- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self and others
- Increased aggression, angry outbursts,
- Questions about death and dying
- Increased somatic complaints (sore tummy, headaches)

What adults can do to help

Activities and suggestions vary depending on the age of the child.

Monitor media exposure

Children can become distressed and fearful after watching repeated images of frightening events on the television, as well as other forms of media, and can come to believe that the
world is a scary place. Many children retain longer-term recurrent disturbing memories from viewing violence.

Limit the amount of time children spend watching media coverage of tragedy and terror.

If children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective. Being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions.

**Listen to understand how children are feeling and thinking**

Encourage (but don’t force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the events.

Let them know that it is normal to think and feel that way.

Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events.

Remain patient and provide truthful but simple and thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of the event.

Correct any misperceptions they might have about the events and likely risks.

**Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings**

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.

**Reassure children**

Children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after and that nothing bad will happen to them personally.

Let children know that there are people all over the place working hard to make sure that people stay safe, and that these people are very good at their job.

Do calming activities with children who are distressed.

Reassure them that you are watching out for them.

Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs.

Let them be more dependent on you for a while.

Maintain good routines – predictable family activity is very reassuring for children.
Be aware of how you talk in the presence of children

Shield children from in-depth adult discussion about these events, especially if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development. Children can distort what they hear or see especially when the information is received through indirect communication (for example, overheard adult conversations about worrying things).

Pay attention to your own reactions

Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to air your own feelings or explore your own reactions to the events.

Share your own feelings, but show that you are in control of them.

Be alert to stereotypes

Avoid stereotyping, narrow analyses of the problem, disaster or crisis, and blaming of whole groups for the actions of few.

Help children to separate angry thoughts and feelings about specific people who behave in cruel ways from the larger cultural or religious group to which those people may belong.

Avoid black and white answers.

Leave children with a feeling of security but also hope

Help children to see that their world is basically a safe place, people are usually good, and that life is worth living.

Source: Australian Psychological Society