

Helping Our Kids Feel Safe in a Turbulent World

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It's been a tough few weeks for parents. Reading and watching videos of the recent Boston Marathon bombings and subsequent manhunt has been a thoroughly chilling experience, not just for those of us with ties to the area. News reports of ricin-filled letters and the tragic bombing at the fertilizer plant in Texas have had a further destabilizing effect. The Newtown and Aurora shootings, still fresh in our minds, have again been prominently featured in the reporting on the gun control debate.

Add it all up and it feels a lot like the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when everything seemed to change. Who can help but ask the question- How can we possibly keep our kids safe in this chaotic and unpredictable world?

Lots of people have offered helpful suggestions: try to teach kids to be more aware of their surroundings, to be safe when they are off on their own, and to know where to turn for help when they need it. Not surprisingly some parents have pledged to stay away from large public gatherings for a while, and to monitor and keep a closer eye on their kids when they are out and about.

I can't argue with any of that, but in reality, of course, there is only so much we can do to shield our kids from the world. Accidents happen, tragedies occur, loved ones get ill, and most of these things are not preventable.

But we are not powerless as parents. We have the chance to offer our kids a psychological shield, a buffer against the upsets and blows they will inevitably experience while growing up. Tragic events can feel overwhelming, but they are also opportunities to help our kids feel more resilient and confident about their ability to handle life's challenges.

Here are a few ways that parents can help their children cope:

Share Information about the Event: Piecing together a cohesive narrative is an important coping mechanism for children. We don't want our kids to hear tidbits or rumors about important events from their friends or the media. They can too easily hear misinformation or develop a distorted sense of actual danger. Tell them in age appropriate ways what has happened, where and when, but don't overwhelm with fact and figures.

Focus on their questions and inaccuracies, particularly if they think they are in immediate harm's way. One of the children I spoke to last week mentioned casually that 9/11 happened just last school year. I was puzzled until he exclaimed, "You know in September, 2011." He was quite relieved to hear that the attack closest to where he lived had occurred before he was born.

Connect with their Feelings: Getting the story right is the first priority, but don't overlook the emotional impact of traumatic events on kids. They need room to express how they are feeling in a safe and non-judgmental place. It can be helpful for us parents to model for kids, to talk about our feelings ("It was so sad to hear about the death of your classmate's Dad's") and ask them to share with us. Be careful not to overdo it or to force them to talk if they're not ready.

We also shouldn't assume that their reactions will be the same as ours. Many times I see kids who are more confused than anything else, or feel "weird" or "a little scared" and out of sorts. That's perfectly normal, and it can help for them to hear that these mixed-up feelings are okay.

Reassure Children of their own Safety and Security. When we are shook-up and frightened by traumatic events it is especially hard to calm our kids' fears and to reassure them. But this is when they need us most. Let them know that things will be okay, that we can protect them and take care of ourselves. Even if they don't appear anxious, most kids will be at least a little shook up by the big things they hear about. They look to us to set them straight.

Don't worry about promising too much. Young kids in particular need to hear in no uncertain terms that their Moms and Dads will keep them safe and healthy. Remind them that there are other caring adults in the community who look out for them, like their teachers and the police ("Don't worry, they will get the bad guys and put them in jail").

Older kids need a more nuanced message, but we can appeal to their knowledge and understanding of probability: "It was a terrible tragedy, but we live in a country with over 300 million people and the chance of that affecting our family is very remote."

Maintain Routines. Getting back to normal habits and routines is the best salve for emotional upheavals. The regularity of the school schedule, family meals, sporting events and other activities provide a much needed sense that everyday life can resume again. Turning off the news and building in extra family and leisure time with Mom and Dad can also help kids regain a feeling of stability and security.

Remain Optimistic About the Future. This is asking a lot of parents. The weight of our personal burdens and the tragedies in this country and around the world can at times feel like too much to bear. Yet our children need to hear that the "sun will shine tomorrow" (an oft-heard phrase, but one I still frequently repeat to parents and kids!), that we are strong, and that we have faith that their future is bright.

It can help to remember that true resilience comes from overcoming our struggles. While we would never want our kids to be exposed to trauma, and wish for all of them to have a peaceful and idyllic existence, the reality is that life's tragedies and uncertainties will intrude from time to time. If we show children that we have the resolve to persevere and maintain hope about what is yet to come, it is far more likely that they will stay strong and look forward to what lies ahead for them.