

Helping Children Deal With Tragedy

Sandy Hook Elementary. The Boston Marathon. In less than six short months our country has been shaken by two senseless acts of violence. In both cases young children were among the victims.

When tragedies such as these occur, the whole world watches including countless children not directly affected by the events themselves. This leaves the adults in the lives of children, their parents and teachers, with the challenge of helping their children understand and cope with the events. It is not an easy task and if we are honest, we adults may have a difficult time processing the experience as well. It can be quite scary for all of us when acts of violence are seemingly random and unpredictable. We may try and rationalize it all by saying that "it can't happen here" but that elementary school and that street in Boston was somebody's "here."

So how might we help children who were not directly involved but have been exposed to such events as observers and consumers of news? The answer to that question, of course, depends on the age of the child. The very young child should just be shielded from the news altogether. She doesn't yet have the cognitive or emotional capacity to process what has happened and will just be frightened by the sounds and images portrayed in the news reports. Even older children should have their amount of exposure to the news limited and monitored. As adults we might recognize that the television news is repeating the same stories and presenting the same images over and over again but some young children may not understand this and think that the event is actually happening over and over again.

How we explain things to children will again depend upon their age. With young children we need to be brief, calm, and reassuring. Even if deep down we know we can't protect our children from all dangers, we need to explain to them that the adults in their lives are there to take care of them and will be there to make sure nothing bad happens. As much as some children might want to revisit the experience, at some point we should stop talking about it and redirect their attention to other matters. We should try to maintain the normal routines of life as much as possible. It is easy for us to be caught up in the ongoing events of the tragedy by watching endless hours of television reports but our children's lives need to be kept as normal as possible.

If we do have children old enough to be able to somewhat understand and process what has happened, it may be helpful to remember some advice offered by Fred Rogers, or as he was known to so many children, Mr. Rogers. He suggested that in viewing the scenes of chaos and sadness that are part of such tragedies, we try and focus children's attention on the "helpers." In all of these scenes there are always people - police, firefighters, doctors and nurses, Red Cross volunteers, ordinary citizens - who are there to help the people in need. Rather than just letting children focus on the pain, suffering, and the "bad guys," Mr. Rogers was saying that children should have their attention directed to the "good guys," the people who are there to help.

Our feelings about such tragedies as the ones that happened at the Sandy Hook Elementary and the Boston Marathon, feelings that may include both sadness and anger, can be overwhelming at times. As adults, we may have the experience and emotional resources to help us deal with those feelings. For children, the feelings may be fear and confusion more than sadness and anger, and they may not have the resources to deal with those feelings. It is our responsibility as the adults in their lives to be that resource.

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