

Media: Natural Disasters & Violence

Children's exposure to media is vast. Television, movies, video games and the internet often immerse children into crisis situations which tend to be violent. War, crime, terrorism and natural disasters can dominate the news in graphic detail and be frightening and confusing to children of all ages. Children can be witnesses to, as well as victims of, such events. They depend on the adults in their life to keep them safe and help them react to, process and understand what is happening in the world.

Young children can struggle to understand what they see and often incorporate it into their ideas and behavior. Many messages in the media undermine their sense of safety and trust and can create the impression that fighting or using weapons is normal and necessary.



Attempts to ban media-influenced play are usually unsuccessful. It also denies children the opportunity to explore what they see in the media. Observing children's actions can lead to a deeper understanding of how they interpret what they see. This knowledge can help counteract damaging media messages.

While adults can attempt to sort out details and practice selective listening skills, children do not have this ability. A preschooler's thinking is concrete and self-centered. War, peace, and acts of nature are abstract terms which are difficult for them to understand. Children respond to the emotions and reactions of the adults closest to them and must be able to trust their caregivers. Adults play an essential role in helping children cope successfully.

The following suggestions are designed to guide adults as they help children cope in developmentally appropriate ways.

Maintain regular routines whenever possible. Children receive great comfort from adults with the ability to remain calm and provide consistency and structure in their lives. Maintaining routines for eating and sleeping, extracurricular and enrichment activities and child care and/or school attendance, gives children a sense of control and purpose in their daily interactions.

Avoid overexposure to media. Media can be graphic and when children watch television they are more likely to feel afraid and confused. Children are still developing the concepts of time and space and may assume that what they are seeing on the television is close to home. Watch television together and help children be critical viewers. School-age children may find it helpful to look up where the crises are happening.

Answer questions. Children are afraid when they do not understand what is happening around them. Stay calm and respond at their developmental level when children ask questions. Keep answers simple, matter of fact and on a "need to know" basis. Too many details can cause increased fear. School-age children can be given a more detailed response, like explaining how a tsunami is formed.

Get children involved in the effort. Let children participate in charitable efforts. This will show them how people around the world work together to help those in need. Ask the children what they would like to do. They can send clothes, food, donate money or write letters to those in need.

Create space where children feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and asking questions.

It is important to acknowledge and respect children's feelings and to provide honest, yet contextual responses to their inquiries. Do not belittle or deny their fears and questions. Be available to listen, without judgment, to their concerns and help them label their emotions with the appropriate words. Reassure children that being scared does not always mean they are in danger. It is important to recognize and support children's emerging beliefs about life, death, religion, war and peace.

Encourage them to express themselves in developmentally appropriate ways. For example, young children may wish to paint or draw a picture of their thoughts and reactions or share a book with an adult; for older children, writing in a journal, donating blood or money and volunteering can be constructive outlets.



Provide reassurance and caring comfort.

Children can feel especially vulnerable, confused and frightened during crises. Explain to them that caring adults in their lives are there to protect them and to help keep them safe. Point out that such incidences are not a regular part of everyday life and that many people are doing their best to help those in need and to prevent such events from happening again. Provide opportunities for loving exchanges, reassuring words and kind actions.

Considering Child Care and the Classroom:

Across the country there are concerns about how the media, media-related toys and other products affect children in child care and the classroom. Reports of increased levels of aggression and more injuries are common and the quality of play is less imaginative and often imitative rather than creative. Children can easily confuse fantasy with reality. Some appear obsessed with specific action figures, making it hard to focus on other activities.

When war is taking place and greatly publicized, it is normal to see more war games being played. Expand war play by talking about things military personnel do, besides fighting, such as: developing secret codes; exercising to stay physically fit; working as a team; learning to read maps and protecting people.

Awareness of other adults that exist to keep us safe, such as fire fighters and police, helps children understand they are part of a community. This sense of belonging helps children explore relationships and treat others with respect. It also provides the security children need to try new things to grow and develop.

Offer children opportunities to share and interpret their experiences through storytelling, art, free play and writing. Encourage creative play rather than play that imitates television shows or movies. Provide materials such as dress-ups, blocks, or play-dough that support imaginative open-ended play.

Give children time to talk about the events of their days. Helping them describe their feelings and observations is important. Let them know that their individual voices are heard and respected, and that talking things over can make a difference. This teaches children that problem-solving does not require fighting or weapons.



Tips on How to Help Children Cope:

- Establish secure, nurturing relationships
- Build safe, predictable learning environments
- Provide opportunities for art, drama, storytelling and writing
- Strengthen communication between parents and caregivers
- Foster children's self-esteem and competence
- Teach peaceful ways to resolve conflict
- Find ways to make children feel powerful (e.g., making a new friend, helping each other)
- Transform imitative play to creative play by providing new materials and activities

Source: Child Care Aware; childcareaware.org

*Excerpts taken from "Helping Children Cope with Violence and Disasters" and "Media is a Powerful Force" by Niki Smidt 2004
"Talking with your Child about Natural Disasters" by Victoria Ianni 2010*