

Discussions with Children About the Tornado

As we begin to come to terms with the loss of life and damages from the tornado, we also face how best to support our youth. Graphic and disturbing pictures and film footage blasts across the television screens in our homes, and our children see people in all kinds of terrible situations.

Sometimes our inclination is to entirely protect our children from what is happening. We would like for youth to have happy childhoods, some level of naiveté, and to grow up without having to live in fear. In other cases, our inclination is to let them choose whatever they want to watch. Perhaps the best route is to look at where the balance is, and to separate that from which children need protection from that for which children need support.

Resilience:

Current research on raising resilient children tells us that those children who are most resilient grew up facing some adversity. We know that we are all born with a capacity toward resiliency, and that what allows resilience to blossom in children is having “protective factors” that allow them to face adversity with a network of support, compassion and understanding, and that in facing that challenge, children are able to draw on internal strength coupled with external support. With that, they are able to cope with the challenge and learn lessons that allow them to have a greater “toolkit” of healthy coping skills. Here are some thoughts about how to help our youth through times such as these.

Avoid Overexposure:

Current research in the field of trauma is telling us that exposure to these events by watching graphic coverage on television can manifest what is called “secondary trauma” or trauma within ourselves from high levels of exposure to the event. Watching the planes fly into the towers over and over on television was plenty enough for children across America and beyond to have nightmares. We sometimes refer to this kind of television coverage phenomenon as “psychological saturation.” If you are in the impact area of the storm, realize that the coverage is all of the very worst of the situation, so it can amplify children’s fears to watch coverage. It is difficult to pull ourselves away from the dramatic scenes, but children don’t have a history or context in which to place all of this, so minimizing their viewing is wise.

Reading and talking with children allows them the time to reflect and question. Television coverage doesn’t allow this reflection in the same way. So instead of thinking so much about protecting them from the awareness of frightening events, think more in terms of protecting them from receiving the information in ways that are overwhelming. So the suggestion isn’t to shield them from the truth, but to give them the truth in ways that allow their brains and minds to make sense of it and to give it meaning.

Children often don’t know whether to bring up frightening thoughts or issues to their parents or teachers. They sometimes read our silence on the issue as a non-verbal cue that the subject isn’t open for discussion. Then they worry in silence and we don’t know.

Having the conversation:

Here is a suggestion on how you might start these difficult conversations with children. It is a formula or format that works for a wide range of difficult issues.

Begin with a sentence of forewarning or framing that this next few minutes isn’t just casual conversation. Something like, “Let’s take a few minutes to talk about the big tornado that came through our town.” That sets the tone that we’re going to talk more deeply and share reflections together.

Next, a statement of the obvious, or a statement of observation. “We all have just lived through the biggest storm of this sort that we’ve ever had.”

Next, a statement of assumption with room for inquiry or correction. “When things like this happen, we have a whole range of reactions. We might still feel fear or have trouble sleeping, sometimes we might feel sad for people who lost more than we did, or who had someone in their family die, or some of us might not be as upset as our friends.” This gives kids the message that, whatever their emotional reaction is at this point, you accept their feelings and believe that it is real for them in that way. Although some may not have much of an emotional reaction

Listen, listen, listen:

Then you can go on with, “Moms (or “dads” or “teachers” or whoever you are to the child) don’t know what kids are thinking unless we ask and listen to you, so I want us to all take some time to listen to one another.” And now the trick is to only listen! Don’t rush in to tell them why they don’t have to worry. That is discounting their emotions, and it asks



them to learn not to believe their own feelings and internal signals. We want to help youth develop emotional intelligence, so we want them to tell us how they feel, and they need us to acknowledge their message as real and accepted. Don't rush in just yet to calm their fears. It is difficult for us to see kids struggle or feel fear, but we often give solutions before we've heard the depths of what they really want us to know. Stay with questioning to take them deeper in this stage. We'll get to the comfort and compassion soon!

Conversation Encouragers:

If the child can just continue speaking about it, let them talk. Try to remember the points to which you'll want to return later, but try not to interrupt them if they are continuing to talk. If they aren't talking easily, some questions you might ask could include:

- When you heard the sirens and your teacher told you where to go, what were you thinking and feeling then?
- What did you expect?
- What were the things that your family/teacher/whomever did to prepare that were helpful?
- What kinds of things might make children fearful?
- What feelings might children have today?
- When did you know you were safe?
- What do you wish someone could answer?
- What do you wish adults understood about how this is for you?

What you might notice about these questions is that, in some cases (those that are of emotional content), instead of asking "What do you feel," we can ask "What might children be feeling..." The reason this is so effective is that it is less confrontational. The child can assume they might be answering for others, so they aren't openly "owning" their fears, and yet you can assume that the fears they're transferring to others are most likely their own. So when a child says that other children might be fearful it could happen again, you might respond with, "That makes sense to me! I bet if I were your age I'd worry about exactly the same thing!" So you're validating that their fear is not unusual, but you also are going to follow up in the conversation with any honest assurances you can. For this stage, the goal is to let the child put words to their most feared aspects, because naming something is the beginning of a sense of control, and takes it out into the light from the hidden place inside them.

Giving reassurance:

Now begin the reassurances.

- When things like this happen, many people immediately mobilize help. And they're good at it. Lets see how many people we can think of in our town (community) who came to help! (Make a list on the board if at school, or on paper at home Police, fire fighters, paramedics, search and rescue, and so on.)
- And who came from a long way away? (Paramedics, power company workers brought trucks, national guard)
- The way we get through difficult times is that we do it together. There are lots of people there who are helping one another, and it started before the storm even arrived!
- This storm is the biggest we've ever had, so we know that this is unusual. We know that all the people who help us put our world back together learn more and more each time they mobilize, so they will know lots that will help.

Highlight successes:

Point out all they've actually done that shows resiliency.

- Even though there were frightening parts, you made it through the storm, and back to school!
- What are the things you did that you realize helped you get through the most frightening moments?
- What do you realize as you look back on the storm now?

Finally, we want to help youth identify what will help them now.

- If there were one thing that you think someone could do that would help you feel better/safer now, what might that be?

Remember, children don't become resilient because they never face adversity. They become resilient because they face adversity with external supports including compassionate adults who listen, that we believe in their abilities to cope and have high expectations of them, and that we give them the means to contribute in a meaningful way.

Children essentially recover about as well as the adults around them. The younger the children, the more their perception of the level of danger comes from the reactions of adults they were with, not the actual danger.

