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News can traumatize children

By Shauna Scott Rhone

Parents should reassure, but it's OK to admit fear, too

Imagine the fears that surfaced in the mind of a child watching the coverage of the World Trade Center and Pentagon on TV Tuesday. Could that happen here? Am I safe?

"Children can be traumatized," says Christi Kettman, outreach coordinator for the Fernside Center for Grieving Children in Norwood.

"Older children can relate it to the feelings of a peer there, or someone's mom or dad, or think, 'I was on a plane.'"

"Teens may recognize now and in the future the impact this will have on our country. It is a part of history, and we can't keep it from them."

Because this event is still unfolding, children will be exposed to it for several days. Parents should be aware that fear may surface. What should parents look for in their child's behavior that shows emotions being internalized?

"If children are consumed with information, have nightmares, lose concentration, begin having trouble making decisions or have a heightened or lowered level of activity, parents might consider getting professional help," Ms. Kettman says.

"Parents should encourage writing their feelings down to help deal with this," says Kathy Bower, a lead psychologist for Cincinnati Public Schools. "It will not be helpful for them to watch television '24-7.' . . . Try to get on as quickly as possible with normal routine and structure."

Dr. W. Michael Nelson, professor of psychology at Xavier University, encourages parents to stand strong in showing their children how to handle crises.

"Children will take their lead from parents, and what parents need to do is talk to their children about this," he says. ". . . It's really conveying a sense of safety, that they're OK and that you need to move on with everyday life until more information is available. Give the children the message that it's OK to ask questions and talk about what's happened."

Ms. Kettman agrees. "For parents, it's OK to be scared or confused. Identify the feelings. Tell the child, 'I'm sad about this, too. I don't understand it, either.' It's OK to not have all the answers, OK to tell them you don't know but do what you can to reassure their safety."

Telling kids

Fernside offers these ways for families to deal with this tragedy:

1. Explain the tragedy to children with age-appropriateness in mind. Younger children may be more concerned about personal safety. Teens can see the big picture.
2. Be as honest as you can. Explain terrorist attacks are not common and reassure their safety. Don't compare it to war.
3. Let your child guide you during the conversation. Let them ask the questions. They'll tell you what they need to know.
4. Monitor television viewing, limit it for highly sensitive kids. Watch coverage with older children and answer their questions. Give them permission to verbalize their feelings, whether they're angry or scared.
5. Follow up: Check in with your child days from now. Repeat what you heard them say before, and be prepared to reassure them more than once. Let them know they're safe. Realize that trauma affects different children differently.

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