

PARENTS, CHILDREN AND PERIL

ST. LOUIS
PSYCHOANALYTIC
INSTITUTE

EASING YOUNGSTERS' FEARS AS WAR COMES CLOSER TO HOME

By Donald Rosenblitt

We are living with a sense of national crisis. Children differ widely in the extent to which they are sensing and reacting to the current climate. We can help children cope successfully with these times by providing: Protection, Discussion, Reassurance, and Perspective.

PROTECTION

1. **Control access to information:** Children six years and under do not have sufficiently abilities to manage information about dangers without experiencing excessive anxiety. Parents can best support their development by shielding them from scary information, including all radio and TV news.

Children ages seven through twelve years can benefit from knowing basic information, but may also suffer excessive anxiety if exposed to overly detailed information or images. Teenage children should have full access to information and images, but still require protection from media bombardment, which can increase anxiety for teenagers and adults alike.

2. **Diminish other family stresses:** Parents can reduce controllable sources of family stress by spending more time with their children, or deferring an elective surgery, a non-essential overnight business trip, or even the adoption of a pet. Change, positive or negative, produces stress.

■ P E R S P E C T I V E S ■

3. **Maintain parental emotional balance:** Children's sense of safety – crucial for successful emotional development – is dependent upon their assessment of how safe their parents feel! Adults should convey a sense of confidence via their words, actions, and feelings. However, adults will feel anxious when there is real danger occurring. Therefore, adults must just do their best, relying upon the people, faith, and activities that help them reduce their own stress.

DISCUSSION

1. **Words can help:** Children use words to master emotions, information, and images. We should encourage discussion while respecting the preferences of those children who rely upon other strategies to achieve mastery of difficult situations. Although children six years and under should learn as little as possible about current crises, parents should provide simple and reassuring explanations for anything they do learn. For example, if a young child asks about emergency preparations, parents could say: "There are a very few people that want to hurt other people. Our government keeps us safe, and they help by telling us how to be careful. Mommy and Daddy also know how to keep us safe."

Children seven years and older benefit from more detailed discussions. Parents should optimally introduce the current events to their children over seven, and encourage dialogues. A conversation starter might be, "There are worrisome things happening in the world. Perhaps you have some ideas or questions for us to talk over?" Parents could acknowledge the danger, but tell children seven years and older: "The chances are very small that anything bad will happen to us or anyone we love."

2. **Be respectful and truthful:** Even if different from their own, parents should respect their child's views, indicating their importance, providing answers and correcting misconceptions. Although parents may withhold frightening details, they should be honest so that they don't shake their child's confidence in their parents and thereby raise anxiety.

3. **Take initiative:** Parents need not wait for their child to raise concerns. A dinner discussion between parents (if there is not a preschooler in the family) can provide children with an important opportunity to learn from their parents' reactions, and to join the discussion. Just as adults need to talk to many people, so children over seven years benefit from varied discussion opportunities.

4. Attend to play: Many children, especially those under six years, use dramatic play to overcome worries. For example, it is helpful, not worrisome, if children play about war when the nation is at war. Parents may comfortably provide props for such play. However, play is not always helpful. Some children need protection from another child's play that is disturbing them. Also, children may not use their own play constructively, such as when play becomes wild, agitating, or compulsive. In such situations, parents and teachers can redirect or limit the play.

REASSURANCE

The love that parents provide for a child is an especially important source of comfort during times of danger. There is no adequate substitute for hugs, hot cocoa, a game of Scrabble, parents' abundant physical presence and verbal reassurances.

PERSPECTIVE

By age seven, children begin to ponder that much of life cannot be controlled and that some people commit destructive acts. It is important for parents and children to grapple together with these issues.

Parents can emphasize and demonstrate what an individual is able to do to increase the order and goodness in the world. In this sense, our current national climate offers parents an important opportunity to help their children grow in their own personal commitment to constructive moral action.



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