

## HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND FRIGHTENING EVENTS

The world can be a scary place for adults and even more so for children who don't share the same emotional or cognitive capacity to understand frightening events that occur. Whether that be a hurricane, shooting, pandemic, or war, children are likely to be aware that something of significance has occurred based upon what they see or perceive around them. Under such challenging circumstances, parents and caregivers may find it difficult to know how to help children understand what is happening.

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An important goal when talking with children about frightening subjects is to help them make sense of what they see and what they hear. Allow the child to lead the conversation by asking, "Is there something that you saw/heard that you want to talk about?" Often, as adults, we make the mistake of either sharing too much or too little information with children, rather than providing the information they need to make sense of what they have seen or heard.

Here are several tips to help when children need to know about difficult subjects:

- **Limit their exposure to upsetting and unnecessary details.** For example, pay attention to and limit children's exposure to media, which often reports intense and frightening information and images that children may not understand or that can scare them.
- **Do not falsely reassure them or pretend the event did not happen.** When children become aware of unsettling or frightening information, acknowledge their awareness and their emotional response to create a shared understanding. Adults should never provide false information to children about what has occurred, even if the intention is to "protect" them. Even under very difficult circumstances (e.g., suicide) children should be provided basic facts about what happened. Withholding important information or misleading children is likely to make them feel less secure, and may result in them fearing that things are worse than they actually are. Let children know whether and how the event will affect their day-to-day life.
- **Choose carefully what to share with them** based upon what they have seen or heard and provide information to address the specific questions they have. Do not make assumptions about what children know. Adults may start a conversation with a comment like "I noticed that you were listening to the news about Ukraine. They showed pictures of tanks moving through the streets. I was wondering what you thought of that or if you had any questions." Children may or may not choose to ask for more information. Even if not, parents and caregivers can say "Even if you don't have questions now, I want you to know that you can always ask when you do have questions. Even for adults, this kind of news can be confusing and scary."
- **Use language that communicates clear meaning and is age-appropriate.** Consider the child's age and developmental stage when deciding the amount, type, and complexity of information shared. For example, telling a preschool aged child that their grandfather is "gone" or "passed away" can be confusing, rather than simply stating "Granddad died. Do you know what it means for someone to die?"
- **Consider that multiple conversations may be necessary.** All information need not be shared in a single conversation, especially with younger children. Reiterating facts will help them acknowledge and comprehend the information you are sharing with them.
- **Model how to manage strong emotions** (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, grief) for children. Help them see that adults may have similar feelings, but we manage that

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fear by talking and sharing our feelings with others, when appropriate. Strong emotions can also be shared through physical play, storytelling, music, and art activities.

- **Reassure children with physical comfort.** When under stress, children, particularly young children, may benefit from a reassuring hug and physical contact more than reassuring words.
- **Guide older children to reliable media and news sources to receive accurate information** and follow up with them afterward to discuss what they read or saw,

or to answer questions that they might have. Children at different ages are likely to acquire information from varying sources, which may be purposefully overly dramatized or inaccurate (e.g., social media). Pre-teens and teenagers, in particular, may access information from unreliable sources that creates greater confusion.

- **Consider consulting with professionals** in your community, such as chaplains, health care providers, or behavioral health specialists, if you need additional guidance about sharing difficult information with children in your life.



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