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Talking to Children When the Unexpected Happens

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Children who have witnessed violence in the home, school, or community are vulnerable to serious long-term problems. The event may be something that was not preventable, such as the death of a family member or a friend, a separation or divorce, or even an attack on someone close to the family. Sometimes the event might not be in your backyard, but it may have an impact on the entire country and world, such as a war. Emotional reactions, including fear, depression, withdrawal, or anger, can occur immediately or sometimes weeks or months after the tragic event. Parents and other caring adults need to support children and adolescents who have experienced a catastrophic event to avoid any long-term emotional harm.

What Can Families Do?

Families often feel helpless after a catastrophic event; however, families can become involved by:

- Spending more time together as a family
- Explaining what is known about the event and initiating conversation by asking questions

- Being available to talk about what has happened and their feelings
- Helping children understand that most people will not hurt them
- Reassuring children they are safe
- Supporting community efforts and public gatherings to support relief workers and victims
- Writing letters or drawing pictures to thank those involved in rescue efforts
- Role playing or pretending to be a rescue worker
- Avoiding prejudices by learning about the culture of other families and world history
- Returning to as normal a routine as possible

Actions to Take

Following a catastrophic event, which may be near or far away, there may be endless local and national media exposure. According to Children Now, almost 40% of children report watching

television news and news magazine programs almost daily or several times a week. Research indicates one-third of children report reading the newspaper daily and/or several times a week. The National PTA and the American Medical Association advocate children's TV viewing should be limited to 2 hours a day or less. Reports indicate children watch television an average of 3 to 5 hours per day and 21 to 23 hours a week. Therefore, it is important for parents to:

- Monitor what children watch on television
- Set limits on the amount of time spent watching television
- Explain that the events shown over and over again only happened on one day
- Avoid violent programming and watching prolonged news coverage about the event
- Turn off the TV and do something else, such as playing a board game or going outside to play and/or exercise together as a family

Alternatives to Anger

Once the initial shock and horror of the event has passed, it is important for adults to help children find alternatives to expressing anger by:

- Helping children understand the emotions of anger and frustration of not knowing what to do
- Understanding that feelings of anger are a legitimate emotion

- Getting rid of toys that celebrate violence and replacing them with positive self-esteem building toys
- Avoiding anger as an excuse to hurt others or be violent
- Avoiding discipline methods that are harsh or physically damaging

Additional information can be obtained from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) toll-free information service, 1-888-ANXIETY, or from the NIMH's web site at: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

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National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov

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