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## **Violence in the News: Talking with Your Child** by Robert Needlman, M.D., F.A.A.P.

By the time your child enters school, chances are he is aware of violence in the world. Perhaps he has seen news reports about wars, riots, or violent crimes. Perhaps he has overheard grown-ups talking about the latest atrocity--a shooting in a school, mass murders in a far away country, or the recent and devastating terrorist attacks in our own land.

How your child responds to such events depends on his temperament and level of development, as well as his personal experience with anger and violence. Because children often take their cues from their parents, your child's response also depends to a great extent on how you handle the issue. You can't prevent the violence in the world from affecting your child, but you can help him better understand these events and maintain some sense of security.

### **Preschool children**

There is no one "right" way for a child to respond to violent events. Very young children have limited ability to comprehend the nature of what has happened, and even to understand what death means. For example, a story about hundreds dead in a bombing might not connect with anything that your child knows, and so may *not* be upsetting. However, if you or another important adult becomes upset, the child will react to your emotion.

### **Young school-age children**

By the time they enter school, most children know something about death. They probably realize, for example, that dead people are gone forever, and they may have experienced the death of a relative, family friend, or pet. They also understand that if something bad happens to other children or families, it could happen to them, too.

Their response to a violent event may be very mild, particularly if the event is far away or seems very disconnected from their own lives. Or it may be quite intense, prompting lots of anxious questions and perhaps stomach aches, headaches, sleep problems, or other physical symptoms. Sometimes a single, simple-sounding question may be the only hint that a child has been thinking long and hard about a frightening event.

### **Older children and teens**

As children grow older, their thinking becomes more complicated. On the one hand, this may allow them to distance themselves from the violent event, which may have taken place in a different part of town, or a different country altogether. On the other hand, an older child is also able to see similarities and think about abstract principles--such as the fact that horrible events *can* and do take place all over, often without warning.

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Preteens and teens often try hard to be cool, and so may deny that a violent event affects them or concerns them even when it does. But given an opportunity to take action, they may tackle a perceived injustice--terrorism, racism or gun violence, for example--with great energy.

Depending upon their temperaments, some children will react more intensely to upsetting news than others. A child who has experienced real violence (for example, one who has witnessed domestic abuse) may react strongly or, conversely, may seem emotionally numb, even to very horrible, graphic stories. A child who shows little or no reaction to a disturbing event is probably letting you know that he cannot cope at all with the reality of what has happened, and so is shutting it out.

### **How you can help**

- **Reassure your child that violent events in the news usually occur far away.** Television brings violent events from around the world directly into our homes in real time, causing everyone to feel less safe. But for most part, these events occurred at some distance and don't pose a threat to the child or the family.
- **Talk with your child about the violence in the world.** If a news story affects you, let your child know how you feel about it. People *should* feel sadness or outrage in response to violent events. Children (especially boys, I think) need to know that it's OK to have emotions and talk about them.
- **Limit their exposure.** If your child is a still young--up to age 9 or 10, or even older in some cases--it's wise to limit his exposure to television murder and mayhem, including real-life violence depicted on news programs. Considering the stories typically covered on any given day, realistically this means not watching television news when young children are in the room--just because they seem to be engaged in playing doesn't mean that they aren't taking in a lot of information from the TV. School-age children also may find it easier to deal with information from the newspapers, rather than the more graphic images from the television.
- **Supply the context.** Acts of violence often come in an historical context that can help a child make sense of the event. Of course, you may have to do some reading first--for example, if your child asks about the violence in Northern Ireland or the Middle East and you're not quite up to speed on the causes or current events of the conflicts. A good test of your own knowledge of any subject is if you can explain it simply enough that a child can understand.

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- **Help your child take action.** Often, a child will respond with a question or two, then let the subject drop. In this case, you may not need to do any more. But if an event--the terrorist attacks, for example, or a shooting near where you live--seems to be particularly worrisome to your child, it's important that you help him take positive action. This might involve writing a letter to a government official or to a newspaper, participating in a food or clothing drive, or doing some other good work. Children also might feel better if they contribute to an effort to protect their own families--helping to buy emergency supplies such as canned food and bottled water, making an emergency contact list, learning first aid and CPR, and so on. Even though such action cannot undo (or stave off) violence, it still allows the child to feel a small amount of control and less helpless. And the underlying message--that it's important to be a force for good--is a vital one for children of any age to learn.

### **Find more information online:**

<http://www.drspock.com/topic/0,1504,677,00.html>

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Reviewed September 12, 2001 by Laura Jana, M.D., F.A.A.P.

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