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Five Tips on How to Protect Your Children When Headline News Reports Disaster By Ronald Mah, LMFT

Recent news reports such as “Tornado Rips through Oklahoma,” “Kidnapped Girls Freed after 10 Years,” “Massacre in Boston,” and “School Shooting in Newtown” have bombarded televisions and newspapers to vie for our attention. People find themselves glued to media reports when disaster occurs. There’s a yearning to know the details of what happened, why it happened, when it began, what went wrong, and more, even as we know we’re watching a continuous loop of the same coverage repeated. If adults are emotionally shaken by the headlines, what must our children be enduring?

Here are five ways to protect your kids when headline news reports disaster:

Protect them from Fantastical Horror. Headline news is sensationalized to grab adult attention. A child’s brain is not mature enough to know how to handle or make sense of the horrific events. Before the age of seven, most children have a difficult time distinguishing tragic events as reality or fantasy. A graphic picture on the front of a newspaper may quickly be embellished in their imaginations and cause them to be fearful of otherwise normal events. Our job as parents is to protect our young children from these horrific images, stories, and headlines. They need to know that they can and will be protected by you.

Limit exposure to societal and global events. Avoid watching or reading the news when around the young children. Be selective about which Internet sites and television shows you allow them to access. Ensure they feel safe within their familial relationship. Their sense of security will depend on how protected and cared for they feel by parents and loved ones.

Provide Black-and-White Beliefs. Between the ages eight and twelve, children will be inquisitive about what’s happening in the world and find information readily available on

television, the Internet, friends, and school. Your child may come home with some far-fetched notion, “We can’t run in the street or else we will all die. It’s just not safe anywhere!” Respond to your child with affirmation and questions in order to open dialogue, “That’s interesting, what makes you say that?” and help straighten out the facts. Validate your child’s attempts to understand the onslaught of information they receive and ensure that your child knows that tragic events are rarities by limiting repetitive exposure to a single event.

Precautions Against Natural and Social Disasters. Let your child see that you have a safety emergency kit in case of an earthquake, you lock the doors at night from intruders, and your family has an emergency plan in case of fire. By discussing the facts with your child, you can soothe their sense of safety and willingness to later elaborate their belief system.

Help Do Something About It. During adolescence, your child will begin to fill in some of the grey area of moral and social dilemma and use many outside resources to formulate conclusions. Listen to them as they mentally work out some of their new ideologies and allow them to be flexible with their mantras. If they feel very passionate about a certain crisis or event, you might inspire them to participate in fundraisers, charity events, or creative expression. You can show your child support by offering your own opinions and beliefs and trusting them to draw their own conclusions.

You know your children best, and depending on age and personality, you can use different monitoring measurements and personally adapt to individual coping needs to protect during times of tragedy.

Biography

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.

A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school



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partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.