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TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENT EVENTS

Although we would like to protect our children from hearing about events like the Boston Marathon bombings, the school or movie theater shootings in Newtown, CT and Aurora, CO the repeated images and reporting on television and internet postings don't allow this. But what we can do is talk about these events to our children to help them understand what happened and to help them cope with their emotions in a healthy manner. The following are suggested steps to help you appropriately address the questions, concerns and feelings of anxiety that your children may have.

- **TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN**

- Talk to your children in age appropriate language and in a safe space where they feel secure – such as your home.
- Be aware that for some children, especially younger ones, it may not be appropriate to “force the issue” if they are not aware of the events or if they do not appear especially concerned.
- Tell your children that these events were serious and not a game.
- While it may upset a child to talk about these events, it can be even more frightening if they believe they can't talk to you about their concerns.
- Let their questions guide how much information to provide.
- Listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – there is no answer that will make everything okay. Listen to their concerns, thoughts and fantasies, answer their questions with simple, direct and honest responses, and provide appropriate reassurance and support.
- Since children may find it easier to talk about what other children are saying or feeling, ask them what their friends are saying.
- At first, some older children may say they don't want or need to discuss it. In most cases, don't try to make them to talk with you. Keep an invitation open and watch for clues they want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or are making dinner.
- If children ask about who is to blame, help them understand that it was committed by one bad person or a small number of bad people, and not by all people of a particular race, religion or ethnic group.

- **REMAIN CALM**

- When talking with your children, pay special attention to remaining calm yourself and keeping your own distress and anxiety under control.

- **HELP CHILDREN FEEL SAFE AND SECURE**

- Reassure your child that you are fine, safe and secure and that you will always be there to help them understand the emotions they are feeling.

- Since children need to know that they are ‘connected’ with adults who care, let them know that your family will be together during difficult times.
 - Tell your child that their school officials and law enforcement agencies are taking actions to protect them and to ensure the safety of all of us.
- **MONITOR, DISCUSS AND RE-FRAME TV IMAGES**
 - Although parents can and should always monitor all of the TV and internet images children have access to, it is not always possible to do so. Be aware that children's viewing of recurring TV news coverage of the events can bring about distress and fear in them.
 - Since many of news programs and online postings show images of injured people, re-frame those images by focusing on all of the good people who quickly and willingly ran to help those who were hurt.
- **MONITOR WHAT IS BEING SAID IN SCHOOL**
 - Older school children are likely to be talking to their friends and classmates about the events. Since you do not know what they are saying, ask your children what they are hearing so you can monitor rumors and correct misconceptions.
- **MONITOR YOUR CHILDREN’S REACTIONS**
 - Children can react in a variety of ways. Some may seem unconcerned or frustrated by the amount of coverage an event receives, others may appear “back to normal” but may still feel sad, scared, anxious or angry, yet others may react through changes in mood, irritability, academic performance, appetite or behavioral problems.
 - Since children remember and experience troubling events differently, any of these reactions can be appropriate; however, if they become pronounced or of concern to you as a parent, seek help from your pediatrician or other trusted healthcare professional.
- **WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR YOUR CHLD**
 - If young children experience persistent bedwetting, continued fear of sleeping alone, night terrors, sadness or eating problems, professional help should be sought – ask your pediatrician for a referral.
 - In older children, if school work begins to suffer, or if a usually outgoing, friendly child becomes isolated or withdrawn, seek professional help – ask your pediatrician or your child’s school counselor for a referral.
 - Some children are particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety if they have experienced prior trauma or loss, or if they already suffer from depression, anxiety, or other mental health needs. Seek professional help for them.
- **MONITOR YOUR OWN CONCERNS, CONVERSATIONS & REACTIONS**
 - If we voice our concerns to our children, we may be raising new worries on the child’s part. Children need to feel that someone is in control and knows what to do. With older children, but only after we have listened to their concerns and drawn them out about their questions and concerns, it may be appropriate to communicate our concerns.

- Since adults have differing views and opinions about many different issues, make sure that any disagreements you have with other adults about the events at hand are not discussed in front of children.
- **MAINTAIN A NORMAL ROUTINE**
 - An effective and reassuring way to let children know that all of you are safe and secure is maintaining your normal routines and keeping your regular schedules.
 - Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise.
 - Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.
- **DEVELOP A FAMILY EMERGENCY PLAN**
 - Develop and periodically review family emergency plans such as how to contact each other, where to meet should something happen, and which adults they can go to if you are not available.
 - Familiarize yourselves with your child's school preparations and plans for emergency situations and other such events.

References / Bibliography

(Please note that certain sections of the above were taken verbatim)

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