Raising Bright Children in a Scary World

by Beth Andrews

Once again, bloody images of a school shooting flashed across national news as parents, families, and friends grieved the recent tragedy at Virginia Tech. No matter how hard we try to protect our children, no place seems safe or exempt from violence. So how do we help our children cope in a capricious, unpredictable, and sometimes very dangerous world? And how do we cope with being a parent in such a scary world?

Sometimes I wish my daughter wasn't quite so smart. She hears and pays attention to things in the media long before she is emotionally ready to deal with what they mean. I had to stop listening to the news in the car when she was three because she would quiz me endlessly about every news story and why the people did what they did. That was fine... unless the news stories were about rape or murder or war. Then she would worry about the victims, and about whether she was next.

We were living one mile from a local suburban high school when two students walked in with machine guns and opened fire on the student body. They killed ten students, one teacher, and then themselves. Many more were severely injured, and some were permanently disabled. My daughter was four at the time.

My cousins had attended this high school several years before the tragedy. It was the kind of upper middle class neighborhood where parents move to make sure their children have a good education and are safe from the violence of the inner city. Kids grow up participating in soccer and Little League, and in the summer they all swim at the neighborhood pool together. People know their neighbors and watch each other's kids grow up. My cousins knew the teacher who was killed-he had been their coach. My aunt was a friend of the school librarian and the principal.

I was at work when I heard the news. Everyone just needed to hold their children close that day. I left early, picked my daughter up at day care, and began the drive home. Traffic is usually bad in big cities, but on this day it was worse than usual. Many of the streets were blocked off, and there was a constant drone of sirens. The drive home was interminable. Of course, she had endless questions about why there were so many police cars and fire trucks.

I tried to shield her from too much news coverage, but it was impossible. It was all anyone ever talked about. A whole community was devastated and struggling to understand. Understand what? No one was even sure what there was to understand. How does something like this happen and no one sees it coming?

The entire youdi group from our church was in the school when it happened, and some of them were hospitalized. All of them were traumatized. The parents were in shock for a long time, as was the whole community. I'm glad I wasn't the minister that Sunday. How do you preach a sermon about such devastation? What can you say that makes any sense?

As the days and weeks went by, counselors and other community members volunteered their time to help the two thousand kids who were in the building that terrible day. Many of them had been hiding anywhere they could find, desperately praying for their lives. Most had lost friends, and some even siblings. I felt guilty about not helping, but I had a four-year-old to think about.

She had lots of questions. Most of them hurt to answer, partly because there was a keen awareness for every parent in the community that it could have been their child who had died.

We'd see a police car and she'd ask, "Mommy, is that policeman going to shoot me?"

"No, honey," I'd answer. "The policemen are there to help us and keep us safe." But I had doubts about whether I really believed what I was saying. Certainly, no one had been able to keep these kids safe.

One day, she said, "Mommy, if those bad guys come to my day care, I'm going to hide under the table and tell all my friends to hide, too." I felt as if I'd been stabbed by a knife, but I had to answer calmly.

I tried to reassure her. "Well, honey, if thiey came to your day care, they couldn't get in. Remember, its locked."

"But what if they had a key?"

"They couldn't get a key. No one would give them one."

"But what if they broke the window and got in?"

"Well, then, the staff would call the police and they would come and protect you."

"What if they didn't get there soon enough?"

The questions went on and on. Finally, with no other way to reassure her, I said, "Honey, those bad guys can't come to your day care because they are dead, too."

She looked puzzled. "So how did they die?"

"Am I really going to have to explain suicide to a four year old?" I thought.

I took a deep breath, and said, "Well, they shot themselves."

Now she looked even more puzzled. "But why would they do that?"

"Because they were sick in the head," I explained. "The important part is that you are safe." That seemed to satisfy her for the moment, but it felt like a hollow promise.

The trouble is, I can't really promise that she will be safe. Events such as this have shattered any illusions we might have held that the world is a safe and predictable place. Every day, we have devastating hurricanes and tornadoes and tsunamis. Even worse, we live in a world where people fly airplanes into high-rise buildings, trying to kill as many people as they can, or blow up a building knowing that there is a day care center in the basement. Yet in spite of our anxieties, we have to find ways to cope and to help our children flourish.

How We Cope (or Don't!) as Adults

Following a traumatic event, a large percentage of adults will experience what mental health professionals call "PostTraumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD). This is essentially a

normal reaction to an abnormal event in which the person is physically harmed, perceives that he or she may be harmed, or witnesses someone else being harmed. Examples of events that can trigger this include natural disasters, life-threatening car accidents, being a victim of a violent crime or witnessing it, war, rape, domestic violence, and childhood physical or sexual abuse. It is a very common problem, with the American Psychological Association estimating about 3.6% of adults ages 18-54 experiencing enough symptoms to be diagnosed with PTSD in any given year. Symptoms of PTSD can show up even months or years later, and typically include some of the following:

1. Nightmares, which may lead to insomnia

2. Flashbacks-suddenly acting or feeling that you are back in die traumatic situation

3. Feeling numb or flooded with feelings

4. Becoming panicked when faced with "triggers"-sights, sounds, or smells that are reminders of the trauma

5. Exaggerated "starde response"-being jumpy and easily starded

6. Feeling detached or distant from others, withdrawing

7. "Hypervigilance"-being on guard or scanning the environment for danger

8. Difficulty concentrating

9. Irritability or explosive anger

10. Avoiding people or situations that are reminders of the trauma

11. Losing interest in activities that used to be fun

12. Thoughts about the trauma that intrude when you are trying to concentrate on something else

13. Being unable to think about the future or acting as if there is no future

14. Feeling guilty for your actions during the trauma or because you survived when others did not

15. Sadness, grief, or depression about what happened.

The degree of reaction depends on a number of factors including the duration and severity of the trauma, the strength of our support systems, and whether we have experienced other past traumas that may be re-activated by the current event. It also matters whether it was a natural or human-caused disaster. Generally human-caused traumas are worse, especially if they were caused by someone we thought we could trust.

Two months after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, a full 17 % of the adult population in the United States experienced enough symptoms to be diagnosed with PTSD, whether or not they were anywhere near New York City at the time. Over the next two years, there was a 49% increase in the number of suicide attempts in the U.S. due to the chronic stress we experienced as a nation. Five years later in 2006, a National Mental Health Association study found that 50% of all Americans and 65% of all parents in the U.S. remain fearful about the threat of terrorism. Obviously even we adults are very affected by traumatic events, both individually and collectively as a society.

Most intriguing, however, is the fact that the majority of adults (and children) who experience a trauma do not develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This concept has been labeled "resilience." In their book Promoting Student Resiliency, Kris Bosworth and Carry WaIz defined resilience as "the ability to succeed in the face of adversity... the process of self-righting and growth... the capacity to meet challenges and become more capable as a result of those experiences." Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein in Raising Resilient Children further describe it as "the inner strength to deal competently and successfully, day after day, with the challenges and demands [encountered].... Resilience embraces the ability...to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity, and trauma, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect." In other words, it is more than just survival. It is the ability to learn, grow, and become a better person as a result of the trauma, to somehow use this painful experience for good in the long run.

The Impact of Traumatic Events on Children

Of course, we have to start by differentiating between children who are victimized by or directly witness traumatic events and those who just experience them through the media. There is a continuum to the risk of problems based on the amount of exposure, but even children not living in a community where violence or another trauma occurs are affected. Degree of impact also depends on the child's age and developmental level, temperament, awareness, and general sensitivity to outside events.

Adults and children alike are probably more affected by traumatic events today than they were a generation ago. With internet and satellite TV coverage of news events, information is more immediate and coverage more graphic. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 was the first to have battle scenes broadcast instantaneously around the world and then replayed twenty-four hours a day. Young children watching these news reports cannot cognitively differentiate between something happening halfway around the world and something posing an immediate danger to them and their family.

According to Lorna Knox, in her 2004 book, Scary News, we are bombarded constantly with more and more information than we were even ten or twenty years ago. The end result is that news events feel more personal and evoke emotions at a faster pace than ever before. This may be a contributing factor to the increased rates of depression in children and adolescents in recent years.

Kids worry much more than we realize. For example, a recent study cited in Paul Foxman's book The Worried Child: Recognizing Anxiety in Children and Helping Them Heal showed that 71% of all 8th and 9th graders worry about being shot or stabbed at school (p. 111). It becomes overwhelming to take in this much emotional material even for adults, let alone for children who do not yet have the skills or emotional maturity to handle it.

Lastly, numerous studies show that children who are exposed to too much violence at an early age can become desensitized to it. That is, they become numb to it and it no longer seems like a big deal to them. This can happen whether the violence is in the home, in the neighborhood and school, or with violent TV and video games. We would do well as parents to pay close attention to monitoring what

our children are exposed to.

Are Gifted Children More Susceptible?

Research is limited in this area, but it stands to reason that many, if not most, gifted children may worry more because they are more aware than others of the world around them. They may intellectually understand all of the possibilities and implications of a situation they see or hear on the news and yet not be at a developmental stage where they are ready to cope with the information emotionally. Our kids may seem mature enough to handle certain situations because they can reason as if they were older. Don't let that fool you. They still need us as adults to protect them from situations they are not emotionally ready to handle.

Two other factors come into play here. First, according to Lesley Sword in "Parenting Emotionally Intense Gifted Children," gifted children often have a heightened sensitivity and are more intense emotionally than other kids. This is part of their giftedness and a wonderful asset, but it can also be anxiety-provoking and painful for the child (and frustrating for the parent!) They can be much more affected emotionally by the events around them.

Secondly, we parents may carry emotional intensity, heightened awareness, and resulting anxiety with us. Our kids watch us and follow our lead. They may also intuitively sense, and even act out, our feelings. I call my daughter my "little mirror." We need to learn healthy ways to express our feelings so that we can model this behavior rather than intensifying our children's anxiety.

Helping Children Cope with Scary Events

In Scary News, Lorna Knox discussed ways to help children cope with what they hear and experience in the world. The hope is to do more than minimize the damage done by this exposure to world events. "We can give our children the skills to cope with the scary news and have a life filled with light, hope, joy, and appreciation." The bottom line, she says, is to teach kids to make decisions out of love rather than fear. This happens first and foremost by giving them reliable, loving, and secure relationships with their parents and others adults, and by providing a positive, nurturing environment. In turn, this helps them feel safe and confident when faced with anxiety-provoking situations.

Younger children are just not ready developmentally to watch media coverage of traumatic events in the same way that they are not ready for a horror movie. They are not yet able to separate fact from fiction, put things into perspective, or understand that there is no direct danger to them. Therapists found, for example, that young children who watched media images of the twin towers falling on 9/11 believed that every time they saw it again, it was happening again. Even in cases where they might be directly effected (e.g., their parent is deployed to a war zone), they do not need to be frightened unnecessarily. They should not be allowed to watch TV news or experience other media images without close parental supervision.

At any age, Knox suggested carefully examining whether the information is unavoidable and necessary, whether it provides an opportunity for growth, and whether your child is ready for it. At age four, my daughter was not ready for what she saw and heard but it was so pervasive that exposure to the event was unavoidable. I sheltered her from the news as much as possible, then talked with her about what she did hear. In fact, her most vivid memory of the event is of me pulling her away from the TV!

According to Knox, it is wise to refrain from discussing adult topics when children might be listening in, to provide comfort and show affection in stressful times, and to keep routines in place. Talk with children about their fears directly, giving them facts and reassurance. Lastly, communicate to children that we can all learn and grow from each experience, whether it be positive or negative. We can choose to become stronger and wiser as a result.

It is important to talk with children about the fact that the world isn't a perfect place. There is a struggle between good and evil, and bad things do happen. Good can also come out of an evil situation. Most children's movies have a theme along these lines which can be used as a starting point for discussion. In doing so, however, we need to be cautious to use age appropriate language, keeping in mind the child's developmental level. We need to use "honesty with restraint." That is, tell the truth and answer their questions but without giving a lot of details for which they may not be ready.

In a disaster or other situation of trauma, adults usually want to do something to help. They donate food, clothing, and money. They volunteer their time or expertise in whatever way they can. This helps them feel as it they are contributing and wards off helplessness and hopelessness. Children are no different. In doing something to help the victims of a trauma, they feel as if they are important and

contributing. They also learn an important value-the importance of reaching out to help others. As parents, we can help them find a way to help-for example, contributing part of their allowance, drawing pictures and cards for victims or rescue workers, or helping deliver food and clothing.

How Much to Protect

Most aware and caring parents these days struggle with the balance between vigilantly protecting our children from harm versus not wanting to be overprotective or discouraging kids from experiencing the world. We are much more aware of the dangers awaiting our children in the world than at any time in the past. Twenty years ago there was no such thing as an internet sex predator. Drugs were less prevalent at such an early age. School shootings were not at such a large scale nor were they national news. It would have been unthinkable to watch an execution live on the computer. The world is changing and we must change with it. So how do we as parents teach our children to be aware and cautious without scaring them too much or making them constantly anxious?

There is no easy answer, no formula to follow. We face this same question with each new situation:

"Yes, I know your friend's mother lets her stay home alone but I do not believe that you are old enough."

"No, you may not go to your friend's house unless I know the parents."

"You may ride your bicycle but only on this street where I can see you and only with a helmet."

"You may no longer play with this friend because he thinks it is funny to lie, steal, and hit you."

"I know you are angry about it, but I will monitor what websites you visit and not let you email with people you don't know."

Talk with other parents who share your values and whose opinions you trust. But above all, trust your gut. If it feels unsafe, it probably is. It is usually better to err on the side of safety. Don't be afraid to say no just because other kids are allowed to do something. Paul Foxman suggested (p. 112) that we teach children about high-risk situations (for example, internet child molesters and how they work), but this must be balanced with reassuring kids that although there are real dangers to look out for, in many cases the chances are low of something bad happening.

Strengths Our Children Have That Can Help

Bright children have strengths that can be used to help them cope. First, they have a higher reasoning ability than many other children. They are able to understand concepts at an earlier age and are more verbal and able to discuss their thoughts and feelings. This can be used to give them an edge on understanding community or world events.

Secondly, you are concerned enough to read this so we know they have at least one caring and involved parent or other adult in their life. This love and security is probably the most important factor in building resilience. Even if they go through a trauma, they will be much more capable of bouncing back if they know you are there to support them.

Lastly, their emotional sensitivity gives them a greater capacity for empathy and understanding of the importance of justice. As parents, we can further emphasize the importance of having compassion for and giving to others. We can teach them that they have a responsibility to make the world a better place. We can give them the tools to stand up for what is right, help others, and create hope. Our children are the leaders of tomorrow, with the capacity to change the world. As we guide them in how to use their strengths, they can and will make a difference.