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## Chapter 6

# Media Exposure and Traumatic Events: How Much Media Coverage is Too Much?

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Media coverage of natural disasters and other traumatic events is often exhaustive. Parents need to ask themselves how they want to regulate their children's consumption of this coverage, whether it is via television, the internet, radio or other media.

Media coverage can provide children and parents with valuable information. It can keep people informed and connected. Yet, exposure to repeated media coverage of traumatic events and natural disasters can result in trauma-related effects for some children. Children with a history of traumatic stress could be re-traumatized as a result of repeated exposure to media coverage. It is critical that parents and school professionals be aware of the possibility of re-traumatizing children and be prepared to act on the stress and trauma-related effects that may follow exposure to media coverage about disasters or terrorism.

### **AGE GUIDE TO CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO NEWS ABOUT WAR, TERRORISM AND NATURAL DISASTERS**

It is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about news they hear. Children may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not be aware of how long they are being affected by the news. Parents can look for clues as to how their child is reacting. Please refer to Chapter 1 for more information on common reactions to traumatic events.

Children's age influences their reactions to stories they hear and images they see about violent acts or traumatic events in the media. Younger children may be most upset by the sights and sounds they see and hear regarding

terrorism or natural disasters. It is important to consider children's maturity level when making decisions about how much information to share about acts of war and terrorism.

#### **Preschool-age children:**

- Can be easily overwhelmed by news about war, terrorism or natural disasters
- May confuse reality and facts with their fantasies
- Do not have the ability to keep events in perspective
- May be unable to block out troubling thoughts
- May personalize the news they hear, relating it to events or issues in their lives
- Are concerned about separation from parents
- May ask questions about children in the news who are alone or lost a parent
- Focus on good and bad behavior, and may bring up topics related to their own good and bad behaviors

#### **Elementary school-age children:**

- Understand the difference between fantasy and reality, however, they may have trouble keeping them separate at certain times, particularly times of heightened stress and fear
- May equate a scene from a scary movie with news footage and think that the news events are worse than they really are
- May not realize that the same incident is rebroadcast and may think that more people are involved than is the case



- May have difficulty recognizing that the conflict or natural disaster is not close to home; the graphic and immediate nature of the news makes it seem as if the events and threats are nearby
- May personalize the news they hear, relating it to events or issues in their lives
- Are usually concerned about separation from parents
- Are concerned about fairness and punishment

### **Middle and high school-age adolescents:**

- May be able to recognize the proximity of a threat of war
- May be interested and intrigued by the politics of a situation and feel a need to take a stand or action
- May show a desire to be involved in political or charitable activities related to violent acts or stressful events
- Consider larger issues related to ethics, politics and even their own involvement in a potential response through the armed forces (teenagers, like adults, become reflective about life and re-examine priorities and interests)

In addition to age and maturity, children's individual personality style and temperament play a significant role in their responses to terrorism, war and natural disasters. Some children are more naturally prone to be fearful and the news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. Additionally, children who know someone directly exposed to or affected by the traumatic event may be especially affected. At the other extreme, however, some children become immune to, or ignore, the suffering they see in the news. They can become numb and overloaded due to the repetitive nature of the reports or the events that they directly experienced.

### **IDENTIFYING AT-RISK BEHAVIORS SPECIFICALLY RELATED TO TERRORISM AND WAR**

War play is not necessarily an indication of a problem for children exposed to violent acts. It is normal for children to play games related to war and this may increase in response to current events as they actively work with the information, imitate, act out or problem-solve different scenarios. Parents and professionals should be on the lookout for:

- Regressive behaviors (children engage in behaviors expected of a younger child)
- Overly aggressive behaviors

- Overly withdrawn behaviors
- Nightmares or night terrors
- An obsession with violence
- Extreme solutions based on what children have seen in the movies or experienced while playing video games
- Emotional detachment (e.g., numbness, apathy) related to the tragedies

Please refer to Chapter 2 for additional specific information related to children at risk related to traumatic events, including acts of terror and natural disasters.

### **TIPS FOR MEDIA EXPOSURE**

**Listen** Parents and professionals are encouraged to listen to children's feelings and thoughts about the events portrayed in the media. It is important to determine children's understanding of the events and their perceptions of what happened and what will happen in the future.

**Be an active participant** It is best for parents and school professionals to watch or listen to media coverage with their children. Adults should talk about what a child is seeing or hearing in the news.

**Clarify misconceptions** Children may not fully understand the information provided by the media. Often, the news is provided briefly and swiftly, and news presenters dramatize in order to make for fascinating news coverage. It is important that parents and school professionals clarify the information that is being presented through the media in clear facts. This is especially important for younger children, who may not realize that what they are repeatedly seeing is one event being replayed.

**Put the news into perspective** It is the role of adults to put the traumatic events presented via media coverage in perspective for children. Children often need to be reminded that although there is continuous media coverage on the traumatic event, such events do not happen all the time.

**Be positive** It may also be helpful for adults to point out the positives that are occurring in the face of traumatic events. For instance, highlighting the work of rescue workers, volunteers and others can point to the strength of the community and steps taken towards creating a safe environment for children and adults.



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**Invite questions** It is critical that children be encouraged to ask questions about information they obtain through the media. Children may misunderstand what they hear in the media. Erroneous assumptions may be very anxiety-provoking for children. By asking questions and talking with children, parents and school professionals can correct misinformed assumptions and reduce the anxiety and fear in children. If adults do not address many of these questions and concerns, children may cobble together information from other sources, including each other. Parents and school professionals should be the primary sources that provide children with accurate information in an appropriate manner. (See Chapters 7 and 8 on information on how to answer questions.)

**Limit media coverage** Although children should be provided with basic facts and their questions should be answered, it is important that adults monitor children's exposure to the media. Adults are encouraged to limit media coverage during and after the event, and monitor children's exposure to news and special presentations regarding others' experiences during and after the traumatic event. When adults believe that children have been exposed to too much media coverage, they need to reorient children to other pursuits. Shut off the television, internet or radio and focus on other activities that children enjoy.