

Raising Children in Turbulent Times

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Traumatic events take many forms. Unfortunately many people have experienced events such as fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, accidents, illnesses, death of a loved one, divorce, and violent acts.

Currently, at this time in our country, things are changing fast, and some of the policies and actions from the new administration are causing fear, confusion, suffering, and anxiety in our country and throughout the world. Protests and marches are happening on a daily basis, and for many there is a sense that each day will bring something new to face.

As adults we need to be prepared to handle our reactions to events so we can be there for the children who count on us to protect them and guide them.

★ Suggestions to consider

Be aware of your emotional state and respond to a child in a calm, thoughtful, and honest manner. Remember that children can hear you when you're on your phone.

- ▶ You may have a worried look on your face, you may feel angry, or you may be crying. As soon as you can, focus on what your child needs, and let your voice, gestures, and body language be reassuring.

Children want to know that they will be safe. They need to see that the adults are in charge and that they are doing all that they can to ensure safety.

- ▶ Tell them what kinds of things you do to keep them safe.
- ▶ Talk to them about the people in their family, school, and community who are helpers and who they can count on when things are confusing or scary.

Always find out what a child already knows and keep your explanations simple. Give information that will clarify facts and reassure your child.

- ▶ You may need to start by correcting misinformation.
- ▶ Give children information at their level and be truthful.
- ▶ If you have a young child you can shield them from the events that are happening. Remember though, that young children pick up on adult's fears and concerns even if they don't know the details of what is going on.
- ▶ Even if you have shielded children at home, they will hear all kinds of things from other children in childcare or school.
- ▶ Listen to what the children are telling each other. Ask them what they have heard at school about the event or issue.

- ▶ Find ways to use the current situation to discuss things that might occur in school. For example if you ask an 8 year old, “What have you heard about the President?” A response may be “I heard he was a bully.” You can then ask if your child has had any experiences with bullies at school? From there you can discuss why someone may be a bully and what to do about that.
- ▶ Help your child understand that people have different opinions of the people in our government. As he gets older he can learn more about how our government works, and the values he would like to see in our leaders.
- ▶ If you focus on family values, you can use the discussion as a way to strengthen some values such as kindness, compassion, fairness, and gratitude. Don’t be surprised if your child has a point of view that is different from yours.

Turn the TV off. Young children do not benefit from seeing the dramatic images of a disaster or people who are frightened or angry.

- ▶ If children see frightening images on TV, tune into their feelings. You may need to give them help in articulating what they saw and how they felt.

Over time keep your investigative cap on. Children may be hearing scary things from neighbors, relatives, or friends.

- ▶ Talk with parents and teachers about who is talking about what.
- ▶ Observe children’s play, listen to what they are saying, and provide extra comfort. Acknowledge their feelings and your own. For example you can tell a child that you were scared when you saw the fire truck at the house.
- ▶ Some children will act out what they saw. For example a child may build a building with blocks and then crash it to the ground over and over again. If they are not hurting themselves or others, let them use play to work out their concerns. You may need to set limits and use distraction if a child needs to move on.

People feel a loss of control when there is a disaster or violent event, or even a fear of one. Think of things that you and your children can do to increase a sense of agency.

- ▶ You can draw pictures or posters, write a letter, collect money, send a package, plant flowers, join a march, bring food to someone in need.
- ▶ Stay connected. Read stories based on your values. For older children, help them with actions that are fitting to their age and ability.

Consider a child’s age and developmental stage.

- ▶ If a child is under two, you don’t have the advantage of language skills for communication. Babies may be fussy due to sensitivity to the adults around them, or there could be a change in eating or sleeping patterns. Babies needs a sense of security and routine. Hold them more. Playing with a baby can also help you relax.
- ▶ If a child is 3-5 years old you have the advantage of language and verbal communication. Listen to a child’s questions and try to answer what they ask without giving more information than needed. Don’t be surprised if a child wants you to repeat the answer

many times. Use different modes of communication, for example tell or read stories, draw pictures, play games, role play with puppets or dolls.

- ▶ You can set up a number scale with children where (10) is when they have felt the happiest and had a great day and (0) is when they have felt the worst ever and had a terrible day. This is a way to check in with them to see what kind of day they are having. Ask them what they could do to change their day to a higher number.

Consider a child's temperament. A person's behavioral style will influence how they respond to challenging events.

- ▶ Children who are intense are likely to have strong reactions to what they experience and feel. They may have tantrums, cry more, talk more, or be more demanding of attention. Help them express their feelings in a constructive way.
- ▶ Children who are sensitive may pick up on parental feelings or expressions easily, or may be bothered by the noise level if it's higher than usual.
- ▶ When children are withdrawing or slow to warm up they may stand back and not ask questions or express their feelings. They may have more trouble separating from a parent. Check in with them.
- ▶ High energy children may get more active than usual when upset or anxious and have trouble sitting still or playing quietly. "Bouncing off the walls," can be one way for them to express concerns. Help them find other ways.
- ▶ Some children are slow to adapt to change and may dig in their heels when the routine is not as usual. Dawdling, or refusing to follow instructions is common.
- ▶ To get more information on temperament you can do a profile on a child (4mo-5yrs) at www.preventiveoz.org.

Stay aware of children who have experienced a traumatic event in the past, such as children whose parents or relative has died, a child who has had an operation, or children who have suffered from abuse, neglect, or other violence. These children are more susceptible to strong feelings or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Deal generously with your own feelings and needs. If you are overwhelmed by your reactions find another adult to talk to or seek counseling. Take time to renew your energy and do your best to get enough sleep. Your children are watching you.