

Helping Children Deal with Tragic Events in the News: Timeless wisdom from Fred Rogers

During his lifetime, Fred Rogers became known for his reassuring way of helping families of young children deal with difficult times, beginning with his response to Robert Kennedy's assassination. Over the years since then, there have, unfortunately, been other tragic events during which parents and educators turned to him for his calming and thoughtful insight. Fred Rogers' wisdom is timeless, and his messages continue to be valuable for children and the people who care for them, as we deal with the events of today's world.

In times of community or world-wide crisis, it's easy to assume that young children don't know what's going on. But one thing's for sure, children are very sensitive to how their parents feel. They're keenly aware of the expressions on their parents' faces and the tone of their voices. Children sense when their parents are really worried, whether they're watching the news or talking about it with others. No matter what children know about a crisis, it's especially scary for them to realize that their parents are scared.

Who will take care of me?

In times of crisis, children want to know, "Who will take care

of me?” They’re dependent on adults for their survival and security. They’re naturally self-centered. They need to hear very clearly that their parents are doing all they can to take care of them and to keep them safe. They also need to know that people in the government, in their community and in the world, and other people they don’t even know, are working hard to keep them safe, too.

Helping children feel more secure

Play is one of the important ways young children have of dealing with their concerns. But, even playing about the news can be scary and sometimes unsafe. So adults need to be nearby to redirect that kind of play into nurturing themes, such as a hospital for the wounded or a pretend meal for emergency workers. When children are scared and anxious, they might become more dependent, clingy, and afraid to go to bed at night. Whining, aggressive behavior, or toilet accidents may be their way of asking for more comfort from the important adults in their lives. Little by little, as we adults around them become more confident, hopeful and secure, our children probably will, too.

Scary, confusing images

The way that news is presented on television can be quite confusing for a young child. The same video segment may

be shown over and over again through the day, as if each showing was a different event. Someone who has died turns up alive and then dies again and again. Children often become very anxious since they don't understand much about videotaped replays, close-ups, and camera angles. Any televised danger seems close to home to them because the tragic scenes are taking place on the television set right in their own living room. Children can't tell the difference between what's close and what's far away... what's real and what's pretend... or what's new and what's re-run. The younger the children are, the more likely they are to be interested in the typical news scenes of close-up faces, particularly if the people are expressing strong feelings. When there's tragic news, the images on TV are most often much too graphic and too disturbing for young children.

Turn off the TV

When there's something tragic in the news, many parents get concerned about what and how to tell their children. It's even harder than usual if we're struggling with our own powerful feelings about what has happened. Adults may be somewhat surprised that their own reactions to a televised crisis are so strong, but great loss and devastation in the news often reawaken our own earlier losses and fears... even some we thought we have "forgotten." It's easy to allow

ourselves to get drawn into watching televised news of a crisis for hours and hours; however, exposing ourselves to so many tragedies can make us feel hopeless, insecure, and even depressed. We help our children—and ourselves—if we're able to limit our own television viewing. Our children need us to spend time with them—away from the frightening images on the screen.

Talking and listening

Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to give our children all the reasons for such things as war, terrorists, abuse, murders, fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes. If they ask questions, our best answer may be to ask them, "What do you think happened?" If the answer is, "I don't know," then the simplest reply might be something like, "I'm sad about the news, and I'm worried. But I love you, and I'm here to care for you." If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may try to hide those feelings or think something is wrong with them whenever they do feel that way. They certainly don't need details of what's making us sad or scared, but if we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them. Angry feelings are also part of being human, especially when we feel powerless. One of the most important messages we can give our children is, "It's

okay to be angry, but it's not okay to hurt ourselves or others." Besides giving children the right to their anger, we can encourage them to find constructive things to do with their feelings. This way, we'll be giving them useful tools that will serve them all their life and help them to become the world's future peacemakers... ..the world's future "helpers."

Fred Rogers often told this story about when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: "My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world."

Helpful hints

- Do your best to keep the television off, or at least limit how much your child sees of any news event.
- Try to keep yourself calm. Your presence can help your child feel more secure.
- Give your child extra comfort and physical affection, like hugs or snuggling up together with a favorite book. Physical comfort goes a long way towards providing security. That

closeness can nourish you, too.

- Try to keep regular routines as normal as possible.

Children and adults count on familiar patterns of everyday life.

- Plan something that you and your child can enjoy together, like taking a walk or going on a picnic, having some quiet time together or doing something silly. It can help to know there are simple things in life that can help us feel better, both in good times and in bad.

- Even if children don't mention what they've seen or heard in the news, it can help to ask what they think has happened. If parents don't bring up the subject, children can be left with their misinterpretations. You may be surprised at how much your child has heard from others.

- Focus attention on the helpers, like the police, firemen, doctors, nurses, paramedics and volunteers. It's reassuring to know there are many caring people who are doing all they can to help in this world.

- Let your child know if you're making a donation or going to a meeting, writing a letter or e-mail of support, or taking

some other action. It can help children know that adults take many different active roles...and that we don't give in to helplessness in time of crisis.

Fred