Adults had a great deal of difficulty coming to grips with all three of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (Greenman, 2001). In the rush to try to make sense of such acts, and in their efforts to deal with similar traumatic or emergency situations, adults may unintentionally overlook children’s needs. When adults are prepared in advance to respond to children, any stressful situation—from the death of a pet to responding to severe weather warnings—is likely to be less upsetting for all involved.

Young children are more likely to be able to deal positively with changes when they have the support of their parents and teachers. During times of crisis, parents and caregivers naturally want to protect children not only from the physical harm, but also from psychological harm. For example, adults can help children understand the images and rhetoric to which they are exposed (Coufal, 2002).

Although it has been 3 years since the September 11 attacks, children continue to be exposed to media messages that alert people to new threats or heightened levels of concern (Levy, 2001). Early childhood professionals must continue to help children and their families to find ways to deal with the aftermath of terrorism, weather emergencies, and other frightening events.

There is no single best way for adults to best cope with unexpected trauma or its aftermath, but there are ways to provide children with the support they need to deal with their feelings and their fears (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). All children react differently within their own realm of experience, so there is no right or wrong way to approach the issue (Greenman, 2001).

Parents often are at a loss as to what to tell their children, and may decide to say nothing. However, if parents and teachers do not attempt to provide children with accurate information about their concerns, it is unlikely that others will do so (Lavoie, 2002).

For this reason, teachers in child care centers and schools are encouraged to identify resources, offer child development information, facilitate open communication, and hold parent meetings to look at ways adults can deal with uncertainty. Additionally, a child psychologist or other specialist may be asked to provide specific recommendations.

Recognize Children’s Fears

When helping children express their concerns and overcome their fears, it is important to consider how events affect their families, both immediate and extended (Alat, 2002; Dettore, 2002; Massey, 1998). Children must always be viewed as individuals within the context of their families.

Children may not show obvious symptoms of anxiety or stress immediately after being exposed to violence or reports of terrorism. Depending on the child and the family, the symptoms of anxiety may be delayed, but they are no less significant (Shapiro, 2001).

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Symptoms of anxiety that have been noted in children (and often in adults as well) may include:
- nightmares
- excessive worry
- anxiety about being away from home or school
- anxiety about going to school or work
- stomachaches, headaches, or other recurring physical complaints
- a sudden change in eating or sleeping habits (Shapiro, 2001).

Parents of children with disabilities must also recognize their children may demonstrate some of these same symptoms. Again, it is important to take into consideration individual needs and levels of emotional and developmental maturity (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002).

For example, a child who is in a wheelchair may face fears that non-disabled peers may not. He or she may develop a fear of going into buildings with elevators. This fear may be due to the perception that something will happen to the building, or more specifically, the elevator, and the child would not be able to return to the first floor. Alert adults should be prepared to recognize these fears and develop a plan for alleviating the child’s anxiety.

Suggestions for Assisting Preschool Children

During the preschool years, children can more clearly vocalize their concerns and express themselves through their actions and behaviors. Often, feelings of anxiety and tension can be detected by watching children as they play with one another.

Adults working with young children may find these strategies helpful when dealing with uncertain situations (Alat, 2002; Greenman, 2001; Jackson, 1997; Massey, 1998; Oddone, 2002; Shapiro, 2001; Wallach, 1994).

- Be sensitive to every action because infants and toddlers can sense an adult’s anxiety through body language.
- Stay calm when working with young children.
- Maintain normal routines whenever possible.
- Shield infants and toddlers from media reports and adult discussions of the situation as much as possible.
- Support each other with understanding.
- Inform families about precautions and procedures that were followed with their children.
- Share helpful information with each other, including suggestions for dealing with the situation gleaned from other sources.

Ways to Support Infants and Toddlers

Infant and toddlers may not fully comprehend what is occurring, but they do sense that something is amiss. That is why it is so important that parents and teachers deal with their own concerns, issues, and understandings of traumatic events.

- Be sensitive to every action because infants and toddlers can sense an adult’s anxiety through body language.
- Stay calm when working with young children.
- Maintain normal routines whenever possible.
- Shield infants and toddlers from media reports and adult discussions of the situation as much as possible.
- Support each other with understanding.
- Inform families about precautions and procedures that were followed with their children.
- Share helpful information with each other, including suggestions for dealing with the situation gleaned from other sources.

Sudden trauma can cause parents to change how they interact with family members. Family dynamics may well be affected. Any disruption in routine can alter the way infants and toddlers typically behave.

Caregivers and parents can use these strategies to support young children in times of distress (Alat, 2002; Greenman, 2001; Jackson, 1997; Massey, 1998; Oddone, 2002; Shapiro, 2001; Wallach, 1994).

- Be sensitive to every action because infants and toddlers can sense an adult’s anxiety through body language.
- Stay calm when working with young children.
- Maintain normal routines whenever possible.
- Shield infants and toddlers from media reports and adult discussions of the situation as much as possible.
- Support each other with understanding.
- Inform families about precautions and procedures that were followed with their children.
- Share helpful information with each other, including suggestions for dealing with the situation gleaned from other sources.
• Acknowledge that something scary has happened.
• Let children know that adults will respond to the situation.
• Give children plenty of hugs and physical reassurance.
• Try to maintain a normal routine.
• Prevent continuous or disturbing media exposure.
• Provide additional comfort, especially at naptime and bedtime.
• Do not push children to talk.
• Be ready to listen and let children know they can talk with you when they are ready to do so.
• Accept children's attempts to communicate their feelings.
• Answer children's questions simply and honestly.
• Avoid adding information to what children know unless their families have given permission to do so.
• Watch children's body language in an effort to understand and support their play and their “language of grief.”
• Provide ways for children to help others in need.

How to Support Children With Special Needs

When interacting with children who have special needs, adults need to adjust their responses depending on the child's disability. For children with limited cognitive abilities or children with emotional disturbances, these tasks become more complex (Squires, 2002).

Children with mild to moderate disabilities may have more questions and may exhibit less extreme changes in behaviors than their same-age peers without disabilities. Children with moderate to severe disabilities may pose fewer questions and be less aware of the circumstances (Friehe & Swain, 2002).

Regardless of the child's disabilities, families and caregivers are urged to exercise caution in dealing with traumatic situations. Some suggestions offered by the National Association of School Psychologists (2002) include:

• Prepare children for even small changes in routines.
• Discuss traumatic events in a safe and familiar setting.
• Give choices in activities, to the extent possible, so children have a sense of control in their lives.

Subjects & Predicates

Often, feelings of anxiety and tension can be detected by watching preschool children as they play with one another.
believe children are having difficulty coping are urged to encourage their families to seek counseling. Mental health organizations in nearly every community can assist families in meeting the needs of children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Other resources available to families and teachers include Web sites, children’s resources, and printed materials (Alat, 2002; Greenman, 2001; Shapiro, 2001). The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence provides an extensive list of such resources as well as recent media releases at www.nccev.org/violence/children-terrorism.htm.

Adults and growing children alike live in a world that is unpredictable, uncertain, and unfamiliar. Well-informed adults can help children make sense of, and find ways to deal constructively with, the ever-changing world.

**References**


