

Helping Children Cope With Violence

Media-reported violence often intrudes on the daily lives of young children both in their homes and in out-of-home settings. As technology becomes a greater presence in everyone's lives, children cannot help but be exposed to more accounts of real-world violence, and parents and caregivers cannot realistically expect to fully protect children from reports of violence.

The degree to which children are exposed to violence varies greatly, as does the degree to which they are affected. Many children directly experience violence in their own lives. The ideas children build about the role of violence in human interactions come from all of their exposures to it.

Deciding what the adult's role should be in helping children work through the violence they are exposed to presents a big challenge. Most of us would prefer to avoid dealing with disturbing issues in order to protect children's innocence for as long as possible. But not talking to children about the violence they hear about—or actually see first-hand—denies them the opportunity to sort out what they hear and figure out what it means.

In *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*, author Diane E. Levin provides useful strategies for families, caregivers, and educators for dealing with violence in the media, the media environment, and support children's healthy development. The following are some guidelines from the book to help children grapple with real-world violence:

- ▶ Trusted adults play a vital role in helping children sort out what they have heard and need to figure out. Let children know it is okay to raise these kinds of issues with you.
- ▶ Don't expect young children to understand violence as adults do. When working on these issues with a child, try to find out as much as you can about what she knows and understands or is struggling to understand. Base your response on what you find out.
- ▶ When children hear about some thing scary or disturbing, they sometimes relate it to themselves and start to worry about their own safety. Even when you can't make a situation better, reassure children about their safety. For example, say, "That can't happen to you because your parents always..." This kind of reassurance is what children most need to hear.
- ▶ Answer questions and clear up misconceptions but don't try to give children all the information available about a news story. The best guide is to follow the child's lead, giving small pieces of information at a time and seeing how the child responds before deciding what to say next.
- ▶ Look for opportunities to help children learn alternatives to the violence they hear about on the news. One effective way is to point to examples from the child's own experience. For instance, you might say, "I get really upset when people solve their problems by hurting each other. Remember when you got really angry with Sandy for _____? You didn't hurt her. You told her _____." It is also important to make positive conflict resolution a regular part of children's lives.

- ▶ Recognize and support young children's efforts to work out what they have heard through play, drawing, and other activities. This, regardless of anything else you do, can serve a very therapeutic role for children.

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