

GUIDELINES FOR “When the World Is a Dangerous Place: Caring for Children in Violent Times”¹

Diane Levin, Ph.D.²

1. *PROTECT CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY YOUNG CHILDREN, AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE FROM EXPOSURE TO NEWS VIOLENCE AND FROM HEARING ADULTS TALK ABOUT IT.* While it's rarely possible to protect them fully from news violence, having safety & security predominate is still vital for healthy development.
2. *TRUSTED ADULTS HAVE A VITAL ROLE TO PLAY HELPING CHILDREN SORT OUT WHAT THEY SEE & HEAR & FEEL SAFE.* When exposed to violence children need trusted adults to help them *safely* work out their ideas, often over an extended period of time. How you react plays a big role in determining how they think & feel & what they learn.
3. *BASE WHAT YOU SAY ON THE AGE, UNDERSTANDINGS & CONCERNS OF THE CHILDREN.*
 - *YOUNG CHILDREN WON'T UNDERSTAND VIOLENCE AS ADULTS DO.* When they see or hear about something scary, they often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. They tend to focus on one thing at a time and the most salient aspects of what they see. Because they don't have logical causal thinking, it's hard to figure out the logic of what happened and why, or sort out what's pretend and real. They relate what they hear to what they already know which leads to misunderstandings. "Mommy works in a skyscraper; it can blow up too!" or "Planes in the war carry bombs; so planes I see in the sky carry bombs too!"
 - *OLDER CHILDREN BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT WHAT UNDERLIES AN EVENT AND POSSIBLE REAL WORLD IMPLICATIONS.* They use more accurate language and make logical causal connections, but still don't understand all the meanings and can develop misunderstandings and fears. Find out the meanings behind their language and base your responses on what they seem to know and be asking.
4. *START BY FINDING OUT WHAT CHILDREN KNOW.* If a child raises the issue, ask, "What have you heard about that?" You can start a conversation with, "Have you heard anything about a plane crash [or bombs]? What did you hear?"
5. *ANSWER QUESTIONS AND CLEAR UP MISCONCEPTIONS THAT WORRY OR CONFUSE.* You don't need to provide the full story. Just tell children what

¹ Adapted from: *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom (2nd Edition)* by D.E. Levin. (Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, (2003).

² Wheelock College, Boston, MA (617-879-2167; dlevin@wheelock.edu)

they seem to want to know. Don't worry about giving "right answers" or if children have ideas that don't agree with yours. You can help children learn to distinguish real from pretend violence. You can calmly voice your feelings and concerns.

6. *SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EFFORTS TO USE PLAY, ART, AND WRITING TO WORK OUT AN UNDERSTANDING OF SCARY THINGS THEY SEE AND HEAR.* It's normal for children to do this in an ongoing way; it helps them work out ideas and feelings; it shows you what they know and worry about. Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials – blocks, airplanes, emergency vehicles, miniature people, a doctor's kit, markers and paper – help children with this.
7. *BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR SIGNS OF STRESS.* Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating or sleeping, or troubles with transition are all signs that additional supports are needed. Protecting children from violent media images, maintaining routines, providing reassurance & extra hugs can help children regain equilibrium.
8. *HELP CHILDREN LEARN ALTERNATIVES TO THE HARMFUL LESSONS THEY MAY BE LEARNING ABOUT VIOLENCE AND PREJUDICE.* Talk about non-violent ways to solve conflicts in their own lives. Help them look at different points of view in conflicts. Point to positive experiences with people different from themselves. Try to complicate their thinking rather than tell them how to think.
9. *DISCUSS WHAT ADULTS ARE DOING TO MAKE THE SITUATION BETTER AND WHAT CHILDREN CAN DO TO HELP.* Children can feel secure when they see adults working to keep the world safe. And taking meaningful action steps themselves also helps children feel more in control.
10. *TALK WITH OTHER ADULTS.* Work together to support each other's efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes agreeing to protect children from unnecessary exposure to violence. Talking together can also help adults meet their own personal needs.

HELPING PARENTS CARE FOR CHILDREN IN VIOLENT TIMES

GIVE PARENTS INFORMATION ABOUT:

- The range of ways their children are exposed to violence in their own lives & in the media including: in print & electronic media, in entertainment and news media, and in toys and other products
- How young children's understanding of violence is different from adults' & how it changes with age
- How violence affects children and how to recognize those effects

TEACH PARENTS STRATEGIES FOR:

- Recognizing how exposure to violence, including media violence, is affecting their children
- Protecting and limiting their children's exposure to violence
- Evaluating use of TV & other media in the family & developing rituals & routines for using it wisely
- Helping their children reduce their reliance on media by developing alternative interests and activities
- Creating an ongoing connection with their children whereby children feel comfortable raising issues and concerns with parents
- Helping their children make sense of the violence they see and hear—through play, art & discussion
- Talking to their children about the violence they see in ways that take into account how children think and learn and their own individual children's interests, concerns, and needs
- Teaching their children non-violent alternatives to harmful lessons about violence they may be learning from the violence they see.
- Helping their children feel safe in the midst of the violence

HELPING CHILDREN USE PLAY TO WORK OUT SCARY EVENTS AND VIOLENCE*

When young children see scary things in their lives, in the news, or in entertainment media they are affected. They can become confused or frightened, or just interested in figuring out the meaning of what they saw. They often then try to bring it into their PLAY where they can work out ideas and feelings. Here are guidelines to help you respond effectively when such play occurs.

- Watch children as they play to learn more about what they know, are struggling to understand, and may be worried about.
- Remember that for many children it is normal and helpful to bring into their play graphic aspects of what they have seen and heard.
- If the play gets scary or dangerous, gently intervene & redirect it. For example, ask children, "How could people help each other?" Or provide toys such as rescue vehicles & medical equipment.
- Help them come up with ways for extending the play. Try to follow the children's lead in the roles that you take rather than taking over the play.
- After the play, talk to children about what they played. Reassure them about their safety. Answer questions simply. Clear up confusions. Teach alternatives to harmful lessons children may be learning.

* Adapted from: Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's *Entertainment's TRUCE TOY ACTION GUIDE* (The guide can be downloaded from: www.truceteachers.org).