

Published January 14th, 2015

Family Focus

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media coverage that they are not equipped to handle. When hostages were beheaded in Syria recently, a 10-year-old girl I work with began having heightened anxiety and nightmares. She had not only heard what had happened via television news, but she also saw the image of a kneeling hooded figure and a man with a large machete behind him.

It is important to limit children's exposure to television, computer, phone, radio and print news, and to monitor their access to social media sites. You can show them positive and uplifting events, or even small amounts of sad news so they can begin to learn to deal with reality. But they should be sheltered from potential references to violence until they are old enough to cope, which is at least over the age of 13 or 14. Each child is different of course, but the longer you can protect them, the better. It doesn't make sense to encourage our kids to believe in Santa Claus throughout elementary school only to expose them to real world violence at the same time.

To be sure, children pick up information from their friends and classmates. Unfortunately, parents cannot provide complete protection. But in addition to working to limit their exposure, you can be the source of effective reassurance for your children. For example, you can point out every step you have taken to ensure their well-being. Even if you have your own doubts, you need to set those aside and help your children believe they are safe, and that you are convinced they will be safe.

Few things are as scary and threatening to children as seeing their parents worried and

Happy New Year! Although the holidays are over, there are still gifts we can give to our children all year long. One is the gift of emotional protection - shielding them as much as possible emotionally, as well as physically, from the turbulence and violence that exist in our world today. Doing this requires a major effort since disturbing or potentially threatening events seem to surround us frequently.

Often children react to scary situations, real and imagined, with anxiety and fear. For example, the 7-year-old son of a couple I see refused to get out of his father's car in the morning to go to school. "Jake" liked school and did well academically and socially. We discovered that he was afraid something would happen to one of his parents while they were at work and he was in school. He had heard his parents discussing a tornado where his cousins live in Oklahoma. Because Jake's actions first became a school and family disciplinary issue, it took some intervention to find the source of his troublesome behavior.

Another couple's 8-year-old son refused to sleep in his own bed, and he slept on the floor next to his parents' bed for months. He had overheard his parents arguing loudly many times, slamming doors and mentioning divorce. Not surprisingly, he became more fearful and insecure. His reaction finally prompted this couple to get help for their relationship.

Sadly, many children are exposed to news

fearful, because they will not feel that you are able to protect them. Serious and upsetting events in our community and the world at large are hard for adults to handle at times. But like using the oxygen mask on an airplane, you must first help yourself before you can assist your child. If you are experiencing too much worry and anxiety, it is important for you to get help for yourself. Then you will be able to block your own anxieties from affecting those close to you.

As parents it is also important not only to set boundaries for exposure to external sources, but to set your own limits for what your children receive from you. Too often parents talk to each other about sensitive issues or converse on their phones within earshot of their children. Some even discuss inappropriate subjects directly with their children. Worrisome topics such as someone's serious illness or financial problems, or seemingly innocuous topics such as how fat you're feeling or how upset you are with their father (or mother) often contribute to children's unease and fears. It is important to have clear boundaries so that our children understand that adult matters are off limits for them. Practicing discretion is another way to give our kids the valuable gift of increased emotional protection.

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