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## Family Focus

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If your children ask questions about troubling events, offer a simple explanation with much reassurance that they will be okay. Starting at a young age, encourage them to come to you with any questions or worries so they can seek comfort from you. You want them to express anxieties as much as possible to ward off behavioral effects such as depression, anger, low academic performance, self-harm, substance abuse, sleep disorders, eating disorders and more.

I have noticed that during these past years, more parents than ever have reached out to therapists to help their children and teens cope with an overload of anxiety. Often the child or teen has been the one to express a desire to talk to someone. These times have been rough for children and their families.

Briana, age 9, was an only child of divorced parents and suffered from too much exposure to adult issues. Because she was highly intelligent and perceptive, she absorbed much more information than her parents realized. Unfortunately, Briana didn't feel that she could confide her fears and anxieties to either parent and kept them to herself. As a result, she became depressed and developed a nervous tic. These conditions led, in turn, to Briana isolating herself from others which exacerbated her loneliness and depression.

Brad, a sophomore in high school, also wasn't willing to confide in his parents. He heard them experiencing their own anxieties about various issues and didn't want to add to their distress. Brad had high anxiety about grades, getting into college, and being able to socialize comfortably with his peers. Other anxieties revolved around personal safety. Brad didn't want to learn to drive because he worried about having an accident, road rage, and car-jackings. In addition, Brad was worried about what he would do if one or both of his parents died. He only felt comfortable at home, in his room, where he alternated between creating art, playing Minecraft, and watching YouTube.

One important component in working with both Briana and Brad was adding family sessions along with the individual therapy. The goal was to help them become more comfortable sharing their worries and concerns with their parents. Receiving additional support and understanding from the close people in their lives helped Briana and Brad immensely.

Along with sheltering children from disturbing events as much as possible, parents need to demonstrate that they are open and receptive to discussing children's fears and worries. In order to do this, you can get your own support if needed so that you can offer your children congruent reassurance - meaning that your words match your behaviors and body language. If you are reassuring a child with comforting words, but your expression looks worried and alarmed, the child will register the entire message you are presenting and will not necessarily be reassured. Similarly, as in the case of one of Brad's parents, if you are consuming too

These past years have been especially challenging for parents. On top of the typical issues families may experience, there have been many additional threats to our peace of mind. We have had over two years of addressing the coronavirus and all of its worries, accommodations and limitations; political turmoil; worldwide climate problems, with a drought and wildfires threatening our state; financial and housing concerns for many; and now, the tragic war in Ukraine that has been front and center on our minds.

It is more important than ever to try to shelter our children as much as possible from these very scary and unsettling situations. These are adult issues, although even adults often feel very helpless and discouraged by them. Exposing children to worrisome scenarios alters their sense of safety and well-being at a time in their lives when they are dependent and highly influenced by adults' words, behaviors and emotional reactions.

Unfortunately, children may see and hear upsetting information from various sources at times, but parents can refrain from contributing more. You can avoid listening to or watching disturbing media while children are present and avoid discussions of upsetting subjects on the phone or in person with others when children can overhear. Diligent parents can try to prevent children from being exposed to more than they can understand or handle.

much alcohol or other substances, your child may see this as a sign that you are distressed and not approachable.

Of course, the age of your children makes a difference in how much information you share with them. Elementary school age children and younger need the most protection from adult issues. Even if you need to paint a much rosier picture than you believe, you will be providing important comfort for your children. As your children become older, you will need to assess their ability to handle disturbing information so that you don't overwhelm them. It is much better to be cautious in your approach. And because they will pick up information from other sources, it is essential that you check in with them frequently to find out what they are reading and hearing.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a well-accepted principle in the field of psychology, presents physiological needs, such as shelter, food, water and health as the foundation for all humans to be able to thrive. Next is another basic set of needs - safety and security in life and surroundings. These are vital requirements before emotional, social and intellectual needs can be fully attained. We want to provide all the safety nets we can so that our children can be happy and stable and achieve their full potential.

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