

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN FEEL SAFE AFTER A CRIME OR TRAUMATIC EVENT HAS OCCURRED

When a violent crime or other traumatic event has occurred in a community, people of all ages feel understandably shaken and scared. It can take time for these reactions to settle and many parents wonder how to talk to their children about what has happened. It is important to help children feel safe and secure, while also appropriately addressing questions they may have.

If a child is old enough to ask, he or she is usually old enough to know. It is important not to discuss graphic detail with your child, but reply to the question while acknowledging the emotion that drove that question. The following tips may assist in planning how to address your child's questions.



Adapted from the tip sheet, **“Talking with children about violence and injustice”**, provided on the Australian Psychological Society website:

A natural reaction is to protect and shield your children from unpleasant and distressing facts; however, the majority of school-age children are aware of events in the news that involve violence. If not acknowledged and discussed, the worries and anxieties of children about these events can become too frightening and difficult for them to deal with.

Children usually feel less threatened and helpless if parents respond as openly and honestly as possible to their questions and fears. Following are some useful steps that you can use that offer hope to children:

- *Always listen first, and listen closely to what the child is asking or saying, to decide if they are seeking factual information, or if the questions are expressing anxiety.*
- *Allow the child to tell you how they feel. Let them know that it is reasonable to feel angry, depressed, anxious, sad or helpless.*
- *Find out what the child already knows in case they have mistaken ideas or facts, and correct any misconceptions.*
- *Keep your answers appropriate to the child's age, level of understanding, and their emotional maturity. For example, it would be inappropriate to go into details with a pre-schooler, however many 12 year olds may need a longer and more detailed discussion.*
- *Sometimes it may help to talk about your own feelings and how you have coped, but do not burden the child with anxieties that they are unable to handle. Inform your child that lots of people are concerned about the problems of violence and crime and are actively working for peace and justice.*



Fathers have an important role here in being willing to recognise and validate emotions sometimes regarded as 'negative' (such as fear and worry). Reassuring both sons and daughters that it is ok to be scared or worried validates the child and supports the development of emotional intelligence.

It is therefore important for the parent or adult answering questions to remain calm themselves, and to listen carefully to the motivations behind the child's questions. Remember of course to seek support for yourself, as well appropriate opportunities for you to discuss

what has happened and your response to it (make use of professional help and/or informal support networks). This will assist you in being a calm presence and support to your children.

THE COMMUNITY IN NORTH EPPING

In the present situation in North Epping there are likely to be a number of reactions. Some people will be relieved because a person has been arrested and is no longer in the community. Others may be overcome knowing that he had been in the area without them knowing. This second reaction can influence how children remember previous events. As a parent it is therefore helpful to remind your children of recent happy and safe events in their lives (during the past two or so years) which are completely unrelated to the incident. Discuss the strengths and the wonderful things about the community in North Epping and affirm that these things are still true.

Younger children have good imaginations, and these are most active when there is an unfinished story. It is therefore helpful to respond to the news with relief that the incident is over, to help children to be able to move on.

Older children will need to have a way to understand what has happened. This event can become a catalyst in helping your own children to develop their sense of empathy, justice and moral reasoning. It is therefore important to direct conversations towards compassion and general sadness rather than angry reactive behaviour. Comments such as, "he must have had a very sad life" or "it is very sad what happened", help with accepting the tragedy and reduce the need to 'do something', which most often makes things worse.

Adolescents will be able to find out a lot of information for themselves and will be hearing discussions of the events amongst their friends at school. These kinds of conversations need to be limited to prevent the story getting bigger and dominating their thoughts. Therefore parents need to give clear instructions to adolescents that when the discussion comes up it is appropriate to talk about it for a short time only and then move on. Adolescents are also still developing in their moral reasoning and capacity for compassion. Encourage them to observe the range of people's reactions and to evaluate and carefully consider their own response.

Tips for reducing anxiety

- Remembering and sharing stories of fun and happy times in the local community
- Plenty of exercise and outdoor activity
- Extra comforting at night if needed – e.g. children often request to have a light on at bedtime. There is no harm in this, but encourage children to think about when they'll be ready to go back to their usual routine.
- Relaxation and breathing techniques can be helpful – a psychologist can teach these skills

A final important note: if children, adolescents or adults find themselves having flashbacks, ongoing fearful behaviour or an increase in anxiety they should seek professional help as soon as possible.



Prepared by the team members of Alpha Counselling Services:
Lyn Worsley, Clinical Psychologist and practice director
Christina Ott and **Ruth Fordyce**, Psychologists

These staff and a number of others are trained to work with children, adolescents and families to assist with anxiety, grief and trauma counselling. We are located at 4/3 Trelawney St, Eastwood. Phone 9874 9711 to make an enquiry or booking.



Another excellent resource worth looking at is the article **Dealing with tragedy and trauma** on the Raising Children Network website www.raisingchildren.net.au. There is detailed advice about how to communicate with children of various ages.