

Children, anxiety and our world at war

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By the time this article lays open on your kitchen countertop, just another piece of newsprint amidst the clutter of breakfast dishes and half-finished homework and mail waiting to be opened, by the time that you settle down, coffee mug in hand, hoping to discover how to get your kids to do their own laundry or eat their vegetables or appreciate you more, we may be at war.

Listen to the news: The air we breath is tense with talk of deadlines and declarations, with threats and promises broken, mistrust and hatred. The destruction of the twin towers was an unparalleled tragedy, but it wasn't the match that ignited this bonfire. September eleventh was a lens that forced us to see the reality of the world more clearly.

The reality is that our world is a very scary place.

And our children know it.

Our children are barometers of our emotions. Long before we learn words, probably even before we're born, we instinctively resonate with our emotional climate. We feel our parents' feelings the way your hand can feel the gentle rumble of the car's engine through the hood. This kind of emotional resonance is an adaptive skill, one of those primitive basics that helps to keep the species alive.

Its easy to pretend that basic emotional resonance disappears as we mature; that words and numbers, social studies and physics and directions to Walmart and the skill to replace a carburetor replace this primitive interpersonal connection. But its not true.

Maturity is only so many layers of social sophistication insulating our awareness from the harsh emotional reality.

Fortunately, the infant's raw emotional resonance is usually confined to the artificial calm of the nursery. As she (or he) develops insulating layers of socialization, we allow her greater and greater range, confident that she can cope with progressively harsher realities and watching, all the while, for signs that perhaps we've allowed her to go too far.

Movie ratings work this way. Your three year old is probably only prepared to cope with the sugar-coated sing-song calm of a G-rated production. Your ten year old has somewhat better emotional insulation (coping skills) making PG films digestible. Some twelve year olds can walk away from R-rated violence and sexuality unscathed while some adults continue to resonate too closely with the pain.

More simply, consider ski slopes. Practice and skill make some of us ready for expert runs while others never really graduate from the bunny hill.

What happens if you put a bunny hill beginner on a double black diamond summit? What happens if you allow your three year old to watch an R- or an X-rated film? What happens, more generally, if a child is faced with more than she is able to emotionally digest?

Trauma. Anxiety. Anger. Depression.

The good news is that you can usually control which mountains your children ski and which movies they watch. There are many ways in which you can protect them from experiences which you judge may be overwhelming or dangerous. But can you protect

them from reality? Can you insulate them from this scary world in which we live? Should you even try?

** Follow your children's leads** Talk to each child at her own level, listening for what she is prepared to understand and watching for signs that she's had enough. The moment that her attention wavers, the moment that she changes the subject or makes a joke or becomes uncharacteristically clingy or nervous or agitated or grumpy, stop. She's signaling you that she's at her limit. To force more reality on her risks upset that you'll see in changes in her appetite, in her sleep, in her concentration or friendships or learning or compliance with your authority.

"Mommy, why is there a war?"

"Daddy, will Uncle Billy ever come home again?"

"Why were all those people on t.v. dead? Was that real or pretend?"

"Are those bad men going to shoot me?"

Because there is no single answer to any of these questions that is best for all children of all ages in all situations, you must start by getting into your child's head. You must determine what she's thinking and feeling and what she's emotionally prepared to understand. Particularly if a question makes you uncomfortable, start with, "What do you think, sweetie?" Her answer will very likely give you a place to start.

"Mommy, what's a terrorist?"

"What do you think, sweetie?"

The five year old who answers, "Well Billy told me its someone who tears your clothes" is prepared for an entirely different answer than the five year old who answers, "I think its like an army guy who kills people." You can reassure the first child with,

“That Billy is so silly. No one’s going to tear your clothes!” while the second child may be ready for, “That’s right, sweetie. What do you know about terrorists....?”

Beware: They’re listening! Don’t pretend that your kids don’t hear and see what’s going on. It may seem that she’s focused on her homework, absorbed in that video game or fast asleep. Assume that she’s not. You might think that he’s not listening, that he isn’t watching or doesn’t understand. Assume that he is. If you don’t want your kids to see or hear or learn something, don’t take the chance.

The news is the best example. Many nights, the world news should be rated R. As much as you might value a quiet half hour in front of the television catching up on global events, assume that your kids are watching. What do you want them to know? Are you ready to talk it all through afterwards? To explain the confusing parts and defuse the upsetting parts?

Or this newspaper. The front page is full of news of conflict and danger. As much as we applaud a child who reads and who is interested in current events, we have to be prepared to help them digest it. Should you monitor what parts of the paper your five year old sees? Should you read through the headlines out loud together with your twelve year old? Should you ask your thirteen year old to read specific items to keep him up-to-date? Maybe so. But do so aware of the consequences.

Childhood anxiety is increasing. More and more children appear more and more worried and nervous, anxious and scared, and why not? They are barometers of the emotional climate and the emotional climate is very tense.

Childhood anxiety can appear in a hundred different forms, from renewed fears of separation, of bedtime or of monsters in the closet, to nail biting and hair pulling, to

preoccupying worries that disrupt sleep and learning and fun. Some forms of anxiety can be inherited in the same way that eye color is inherited, but even with a genetic predisposition, the environment makes it worse.

So what can we do?

1. Do what your conscience and morals and politics demand to work toward peace and mutual respect in our world. Write or call or e-mail your political representatives, participate on committees and exercise your right to vote. Your genuine feeling that you do have a voice and the ways that you express it will teach your children to do the same. By contrast, your apathy and helplessness will only teach your children apathy and helplessness, creating a generation of anger and depression.
2. Cope with your own fears and worries, anxiety and anger in the most mature way possible. You must have outlets, vents with which you let off the pressure. Best is talking to another adult (far away from prying ears), but exercise and hobbies, reading and entertainment each can be healthy second choices for easing the pressure. Not only will you be a healthier parent, but your children will resonate with your calm.
3. Work with your co-parents (your kids' other caregivers, teachers, coaches and leaders) toward consistency. When kids get the same message in every corner of their lives, they feel more secure.
4. Work with your co-parents to improve communication. Find better ways to share your concerns and goals, the day's events, the strategies that you tried, what worked and what failed. The result will be a calmer child.

5. Monitor your children's media exposure constantly. What television shows are they watching? What DVDs and videos are they renting? What are they exposed to on-line? In print? What do you approve of and what do you forbid? The time that you invest in previewing a movie, watching a show side-by-side, establishing parental controls on the internet and talking it through afterwards is enormously less than the time you would otherwise spend later, helping your kids try to cope with trauma.
6. Practice anti-anxiety techniques now so that these skills are available later, when worries worsen. Learn deep breathing and muscle relation techniques. Develop imagery skills and establish family routines intended to calm and settle the whole group.

----- *Parenting Pointer* -----

For more information about anxiety and relaxation techniques, consider the following:

Raising Functional Families and Taming the Beast Within available at

www.healthyparent.com or from this writer at papaben@inr.net

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by E.J. Bourne (ISBN #157224223xx) teaches many practical tricks for anxiety reduction for people of all ages.

Keys to parenting your anxious child by K. Manassis (ISBN# 0812096053) is a sound practical guide for parenting.

The Hurried Child by D. Elkind (ISBN# 0738204412) is a classic for parents who want to make healthier choices and raise healthier children.

Volcano in my tummy by Whitehouse and Pudney (ISBN #0865713499) helps younger kids with anger and anxiety.

Helping your anxious child by Rapee and colleagues (ISBN #1572241918) talks parents through the most common anxieties children face every day.