

Communicating with Children and Supporting Them in Dificult Times

by Hiromi Niwa Doherty

As a native of Japan, and having family members and many friends in the midst of the devastation, I continue to struggle to find strength to overcome my own fear and sadness. Yet, a question came to me – how do I talk to my four-year-old about this? This awoke me. I felt called to stand up and do something, anything if I can, to protect my own child and to help fellow parents as we work together to protect our children from further harm. How can we support our children while we adults are struggling?

This is a summary of guidance and insights I gained through my research. I was encouraged to find out that there are many things we can do! But compared to the resources I found in English, I found very little in Japanese. That is why I originally wrote down my findings in Japanese and emailed to every email address I had in Japan. Now I have re-written my findings in English and would like to share them with you. Although many of my points are for those directly affected, you may still find them applicable. I thank Ms. Andrea Gambardella of Green Meadow Waldorf School for giving me a jump start with her thoughtful input and support.

1. Turn off the TV

While it is obvious to adults that the TV is replaying the same footage over and over again, these repeated inflow of graphic images and shocking news make young children think that these scary events are still ongoing. Additionally, they do not have a sense of distance, so even reports from a far away country have a strong impact. They may well think what they see on TV is happening right in their own neighborhood.

2. Make them feel safe

Children express their anxiety in various ways. They can become dependent and clingy, afraid to go to bed or bathroom alone, or behave aggressively. Some children may experience physical pains such as a headache and stomachache. Those who have long ago graduated from diapers may have accidents. Give them hugs and physical closeness. Spend time together reading or taking a walk. Give them assurance by telling them we love them and we will continue to take care of them.

3. Be open and receptive to how a child reacts/expresses himself

Let them know that their feelings, thoughts, questions, reactions, however they may communicate (or not communicate), are all valid and we accept them as they are. Invite their expressions with open and receptive attitude, so they can speak to you about anything, when they choose to. Some children prefer not to talk at all—let them be silent. Young children live in the moment and have dream-like minds, which means they may not accumulate or linger on specific emotions or memories, as adults do.

Children may find ways to express and soothe themselves by drawing or playing out their experiences. I will come back to this point later.

4. The best time to talk is when a child asks questions

Many of us remember the events of 9-11 clearly. I know I will not forget about the 3-11 earthquake. We will all have particular events in our lifetimes that will have great significance. At such moments, we are given a possibility to transcend our old selves.

It will not be an easy talk. But you know your child the best, her temperament, thoughts and possible reactions. With that deep knowing, you can address her with sincerity and love.

5. Avoid scientific explanation or frightening graphic images, give simple narrative

Children know intuitively when we are not truthful. Ignoring and understating the fact, or telling a lie (however well meaning it is) will make them more fearful. Give them simple explanations in words they can understand.

Children are born resilient, adaptable and cheerful. Trust their strength, and with your striving to do your best, your child will be able to get the message. Do not leave this task to the TV or anyone else, for if we do this, the parent-child relationship will not be the same. This will be one of the very important moments for you and your child.

6. End with hopeful, encouraging facts and words

I quote from Mr. Rogers,

*"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."*¹

We may not always give them a happy ending, but we can end our story with focus on hope and recovery rather than fear and sadness.

7. If asked, repeat the same story as many times as necessary

Children like repetition. When it is difficult to understand or believe what has been told, they may ask you the same question over and over again. Repeat the same story as many times as they ask you. They feel secure by your consistency and can then process the information at their own pace.

8. Regain rhythm and routines of everyday life

Not just do children like to feel the comfort of the repetition of stories, but children like repetition, and in fact, they thrive on it. Even as adults we will feel anxious when we are out of our routines

¹ <http://www.fci.org/new-site/par-tragic-events.html>

and we may have physical ailments as a result. As early and as much as possible, bring back the rhythm and routine as before.

If nothing else, we can at least say "good morning" or say grace before and after meals. If your life has been changed drastically and it is difficult to bring back the familiar, start a new tradition, something that is small and easy to do. Exercise with children in the morning, say a blessing before meals, or simply pray. If you repeat it every day in the same manner, it will increase the sense of rhythm that will become a security blanket for children. It will be our guiding light, as we sail in the sea of uncertainty.

9. Give children time and space to play

Children's work is play. Under extremely difficult situations, it may be difficult to even think of the cheer and fun of play. As described before, children may process and digest their experiences and emotions through drawing or playing out in "let's pretend" scenarios.

Even temporarily, if children can be immersed in play—by moving their bodies and letting their inner feelings out, it will greatly help them in their healing processes.

Let them be children, as much as you can. Give them time and space. Show them the games you used to play with only a stone. Give them pencil and paper that they may use as they wish.

10. Children imitate adults. Be a role model

Children imitate adults. They are keen observers and do exactly the same. They take in not only our actions, but also our conversations with other adults, and our innermost state of being – how we feel and what we believe—everything! I am not suggesting that we become someone else. We cannot make ourselves up or stand taller than we actually are.

Children see us struggle and stand up again, while keeping our spirits high and fighting our fear and hardships. We do make mistakes and fall back sometimes, but it is our striving, despite it all, that children find strength and courage to imitate.

11. Be active and do something meaningful (pray, donate, help with chores)

If ready and willing, involve children in meaningful activities, they like to help and be part of the bigger world.

12. Give them stories that talk about courage and overcoming sadness and hardship

I started looking for such stories and would like to create a list and/or compilation. Meantime, I was also advised that while the content of a story remains important, it is how we tell them the story, which is more significant. Create a peaceful environment, take a deep breath, so that you can calmly connect with the spirit of the story. Then both you and the children may receive wisdom, comfort and healing from the story.

May we trust our instinct as parents and act courageously. May children smile and laugh again very soon.

Hiromi Niwa Doherty

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prepared for Sophia's Hearth Family Center, Keene NH