

## Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

With all the media coverage surrounding current events, do you ever wonder how much our children are taking in – how much they understand about what is going on? Have you ever thought about the impact these events have on our children? As parents and caregivers, how do you respond to such events – do you have open conversations with your children? For many of us, it can be difficult to find the right way to move through these conversations or respond appropriately.

“As parents and educators, it is often hard to try and understand in the immediate moment what a child is feeling,” says Project Harmony Executive Director Gene Klein. “However, it is absolutely necessary and worth doing so.”

Our children have important jobs to do as they grow up - discovering the world, learning who they are and how to manage such "big" feelings and/or emotions.

Interestingly enough, in a recent Huffington Post Blog, one author pointed out American youth are experiencing more daily stress than adults. They are expected to handle bigger and bigger issues. These levels of stress are not only unhealthy for children but can cause illness as well as significantly impact the brain.

So how do you start the conversation?

- **Let the child lead the discussion.** Ask children what they have heard about the incident and how they feel about it.
- **Clarify any misconceptions.** This is particularly important for young children. For example: If kids see a video clip being replayed on the news, they may not realize it is the same footage. They might think it is happening in real time, over and over again.
- **Limit exposure to breaking news.** We can control the amount of information and the amount of exposure.
- **Don't dismiss how a child feels.** For example, if children say they're anxious, don't tell them they have nothing to be anxious about. If they're anxious, ask why. It could be because they're afraid it could happen at their school or at your workplace. It is important to do some exploring first.
- **Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."** Sometimes we don't have the answers to all of these whys. It's important for parents to say ... I don't know why it happened.

- **Look for the helpers.** Fred Rogers, the beloved children's TV host, famously passed on this advice from his mother: "When something scary is happening, look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."
- **Take positive action together.** In other words, don't just look for the helpers ... *be* the helpers.

## **ABOUT PROJECT HARMONY**

Project Harmony is a nonprofit, community-based organization in Omaha, Nebraska, that has served more than 48,000 children during the past 25 years by providing a child friendly environment in which specially-trained professionals work together to assess, investigate, and resolve child abuse cases. In a nationally unique model, Project Harmony has one centralized location that co-houses with Omaha Police Department Child Victim/Sexual Assault Unit and the Domestic Violence Unit, Nebraska Health & Human Services/Child Protection Service Initial Assessment and Child Abuse Hotline, Lutheran Family Services and Child Saving Institute. Project Harmony exists to protect and support children, collaborate with professionals and engage the community to end child abuse and neglect.

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