

Children imitate adults' reactions to scary events

Unsettling times can be opportunity to teach kids emotional self-control

Madison, WI--Coping with the impacts of natural disasters, wars and other distressing events is difficult for everyone. But how do children fare in the face of these ordeals? Are there ways parents can protect their children from unnecessary emotional shocks?

Researchers have explored these questions by studying children who were exposed to traumatic events. After the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, they found that children who watched great amounts of TV coverage were far more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than children who did not watch. Affected children did not know anyone injured in the bombing, nor did they suffer any physical harm. Their response was based on watching their parents' reactions and TV news. Studies showed the same result after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, and in the build-up to the war in Iraq.

"Sometimes news of world events affects children--events like war, a flood, or an economic crisis," says Dave Riley, UW-Extension child development specialist and professor of human development and family studies at UW-Madison. "But children don't have an automatic reaction. They watch adults to learn how to appraise the meaning of what's happening, and how they ought to react."

If parents and child care teachers are calm, then children will also respond calmly, according to Riley. "The simple act of monitoring your own emotional response to events will prevent many of the problems of stress we see in children. When we turn the volume up and obsessively watch the news reports with worried brows, then children get worried, too."

Learn More

To learn more about helping children cope with natural disasters and terrorism, visit the American Psychological Association website at <http://goo.gl/cYb0l3> and the American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://goo.gl/QjS9ds>

Because children are especially receptive to emotional cues from others, and because they have not yet developed their own ways of responding to events, researchers say that children's emotional responses are strongly influenced by the reactions of adults around them.

And studies confirm that social cues from others are key to the way people often react, contradicting the popular view that emotional responses are automatic and unlearned.

Riley offers the example of baseball players who respond in different ways when the umpire calls them out. One athlete whines to the umpire, another mutters angrily to himself, and a third stays calm. The players all believe that their emotional responses are a natural reaction to frustration.

The reality is that each player has developed a habitual way of responding to this situation. Their reactions are automatic--not inevitable or natural. They are learned habits that could be "unlearned."

"The player who keeps calm and focused is using 'emotional self-regulation,'" says Riley. "Such players may not be in control of events, but they are always in control of their reactions to those events."

Every frustrating or scary event in a child's life is a potential opportunity to teach emotional self-control and a healthy style of coping, Riley says. "We can teach our children to fall apart emotionally at life's changes, or we can teach them calmness and courage in the face of unsettling events by our own example."



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