NCCTS The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress
LEADING THE NATIONAL CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS NETWORK

UCLA NEUROPSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE AND HOSPITAL
DAVID GEFFEN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT UCLA

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES
DUKE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Tips for Parents and Caregivers on Media Coverage of Traumatic Events

The media (television, radio, print, and the internet) play an important part in our lives. The media can inform and educate us and our children. Unfortunately, the media coverage of a traumatic event also has the potential to upset and confuse. There are many ways that parents can help children understand media coverage of traumatic events and manage their exposure.

Understanding Media Exposure

- Media coverage surrounding a traumatic event such as 9-11 can produce increased fears and anxiety in children. At anniversaries of an event, children may experience some of the same feelings and thoughts they had immediately after the event. They may have trouble sleeping, concentrating at school, or have other behavior difficulties. The more time children spend watching coverage of a traumatic event, the more likely they are to have these negative reactions.

- Graphic images and stories of loss may be particularly upsetting to children.

- Very young children may not understand that the coverage and repetition of images from a past event is just that—a replay. They may worry and fear that the event is happening again.

- Excessive exposure to the media coverage of a traumatic event may interfere with children's recovery after an event.

- Children who were directly impacted by an event (e.g., lost someone in the event, were injured in the event, were witness to the event) are most vulnerable to negative effects from excessive media exposure.

What Parents Can Do to Help

- Make a Family Plan. Parents or caregivers should take the lead, with input from older children, in determining the extent your children will be exposed to the media. Consider putting some limits on children's exposure to media coverage of a traumatic event. The younger the child, the less exposure s/he should have. Consider if media exposure is necessary at all for a very young child. Be ready to put your plan into action and set clear limits when necessary.

- Watch and Discuss with Children. To gain a better understanding of how coverage may impact children, watch what they watch. Discuss the stories with them, asking about their thoughts and feelings about what they saw, read or heard. Particularly with older children and adolescents, it is not always possible to review media together. However, taking the time to discuss media coverage can be an excellent way of opening dialogue with your children, getting a better sense of their thoughts, fears and concerns, and understanding their point of view.

- Seize Opportunities for Communication. Sometimes, you will be presented with unexpected opportunities to discuss coverage of a traumatic event. For example, a newsbreak with images or a trauma-related story may interrupt family programming. The images in magazines or newspapers are likely to be viewed by children. Use these opportunities to open conversations related to the event. Assure them that you are available to talk about their feelings and thoughts.

- Plan Time Away from Coverage. Be sure your family has time away from media coverage. This is especially important when media coverage of a breaking story is constant. Consider family activities away from the television, radio, or internet. Be sure your children also have enjoyable social activities planned in the time surrounding a traumatic event. Being with friends and family can have a very positive influence on children's abilities to cope and bounce back after traumatic events.

- Clear Up Any Misunderstandings. Children, particularly younger children, may not always fully understand media coverage of a traumatic event. For example, young children may be unnecessarily concerned about the risk to their own or their family's safety. Younger children also may have greater difficulty separating fantasy from reality. It may be difficult for them to differentiate between scary movies and actual real life events. Clarifications to correct misunderstanding and confusion can be reassuring. It is important not to make assumptions about what your children are thinking, but to find out what they are worried about and then discuss their worries with them.

- Monitor Adult Conversations. Although you may monitor media coverage, it is also important for you to monitor your adult conversations related to the traumatic event and coverage. Even when adults are not aware, children often listen and may not wholly understand what is being said. Overhearing adult conversations may increase worries and fears related to the traumatic event and lead to further confusion and distress.

- Educate Yourself. Children may experience a variety of reactions in the face of traumatic events or reminders of such and event. Many children are resilient and cope well, but some children may have enduring difficulties. These reactions may vary with age and exposure to the event. Learn about the possible reactions in children. This will allow you to be aware of problems your children may be experiencing and make good decisions about if or when any help is needed. More information can be found at: www.nctsnet.org and www.apa.helping.org.

- Plan Ahead. Think about what you will do if stress reactions occur following a traumatic event, or the coverage of its anniversary. Identify resources in your community to gain information about managing reactions as well as when to ask for help. Identify expert resources in your community for help in working with children exposed to traumatic events.

- Be Prepared. Know your community, school, and family plans in the event of an emergency or crisis event. By being prepared, you maintain some control of very difficult situations and this increases your children's sense of security and safety. Ideas for preparedness can be found at www.nctsnet.org and www.ready.gov.

When You and Your Children are Part of the Story

- Know Your Limits. Decide whether or not it is a good idea for you or your children to talk to the media. It is natural to want to tell your story in the aftermath of a traumatic event, but the media may not be the best place to do so (especially for your children). Be sure to keep your children's needs as the priority when making decisions. If you do decide to talk with the media, think ahead about what you are willing and not willing to discuss. Remember, you have the ability to set limits with reporters.

- Know the Story's Point. Ask what the purpose of the story will be and its expected content or direction.

- Talk It Over. Before the interview, discuss the process with your child. Assure him/her that there are no wrong answers. This will help reduce the worry that questions will not be answered appropriately. Give your child permission to say "no" if a question makes him/her uncomfortable.

- Be There and Set Limits. If your child is being interviewed, be present and available for your child. Let the reporter know that if your child becomes upset or distressed as a result of the interview, that the interview may have to be stopped. Make sure the reporter is sensitive to children's needs and has had experience working with children in the past.

- Discuss the Story. Following the interview, discuss the experience with your child, reinforcing the positive aspects of the interview.

- Have a Follow-up Plan. In the event that the interview upsets you or your child, be sure to have a plan for how you will support your child and how to seek help if necessary. Be prepared that the final media piece after it is produced may be very short, or may be edited in ways that do not reflect your experience.

For more information about child traumatic stress please visit our website at:
www.nctsnet.org

###