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Help kids cope with world issues

The world has watched in shock and disbelief the results of the recent tsunamis and the subsequent tragedies that continue to unfold in Southeast Asia. Many of our children, although they remain safe in our homes here in the United States, will be profoundly affected by this unimaginable calamity. Children exposed to terrorism, violence or natural disasters are more at risk than adults of developing emotional problems or behavioral disturbances.

Too many of our children are already in trouble. Between 10 and 20 percent of all school-age children exhibit indicators of emotional or behavioral disorders and 10 to 15 percent of kids and adolescents show signs of depression. Children who are already emotionally at risk may display significant behavioral changes following events such as Sept. 11 or the tsunami disaster. Acute stress reactions and post-traumatic stress disorders are more commonly seen following such devastating events. It is important that we observe our children carefully during periods of extreme crises for indicators of stress or anxiety. Early intervention is the key to preventing more serious behavioral and emotional problems.

Every child expresses worry, fear and stress in a unique and age-dependent manner. Resultant behaviors may include fussiness, irritability, sadness, anger, oppositional behavior, sleep problems, separation anxiety or physical complaints. Recognizing these reactions as possible indicators of distress is the first step toward helping children deal with their feelings. Listening to their concerns and reassuring them that their worries, fears, frustrations and anger are normal and important feelings can be very therapeutic. In these discussions, make certain the feelings discussed are theirs, not yours, and don't push them to put their concerns aside until they have worked them through.

There are a number of guidelines, depending on the age and cognitive level of the child, that parents can use to help protect their children. Repeatedly watching graphic images of violence, war, or natural disasters can be harmful

to children of all ages. Preschool and early elementary-age children should not view disturbing images because they are likely to become frightened and anxious. Older children may want to watch news accounts of natural disasters and terrorist attacks, but should only do so with a parent present to discuss the events unfolding on the screen. Consistently talk with your children about daily events, but in times of crises, monitor their exposure to world events to remain abreast of their awareness and concerns.

Children flourish even in times of anxiety and stress when they feel safe and important. Strengthen their egos, spend more time together as a family, respond to their questions in words they can understand and assure them that you will be there to take care of them. Remember that children are very observant and sensitive to their environment, and may respond negatively if they perceive that a caregiver is upset or overwhelmed.

Although we cannot predict terrorist strikes, accidents, or natural disasters, creating a safe, honest, secure environment for our children will go a long way toward protecting the emotional well-being of the youngsters in our care. To ensure that parents, teachers, and other caregivers remain sources of reassurance for their children during times when they may be emotionally challenged themselves, help can be found on the Internet at the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site at www.aap.org or by contacting your child's pediatrician.

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