

Responding to Scary Events

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Tips to Help Preschoolers Process Scary Events

- Watch for changes in behavior, such as tantrums, lost appetite or unusually quiet or angry behavior.
- Distracting children from feeling sad or worried won't make the feeling go away. Instead, notice children's feelings and help children find ways to feel better: "I see you are sad. I feel sad sometimes too, and it helps when I talk about it or ask for a hug."
- Help children label their feelings: "Are you *mad* that our car was broken in the accident? Are you *scared* that it might happen again? Do you want to talk about it?"
- Be truthful when talking about scary events even if it means saying, "I don't know." ("I don't know why this happened. It is scary but I love you and I'm going to care for you.")
- Avoid making the event even scarier. Limit the news reports and adult conversations children hear about scary events.
- Encourage play. Children often work through their fears when drawing or playing make believe.
- Keep your routines. Familiar environments and patterns can help children feel secure.

Calm Parent, Calm Child

What frightens children? In most cases they are scared by the tension and uncertainty they observe as their own parents and caregivers watch the news. When we turn the volume up and obsessively watch the news reports with worried brows, our children get worried too.



Teaching Children Through Our Actions

Children look to the adults around them for cues on how to respond. If parents and other caregivers are calm, children will also respond calmly. Check your own emotional response to events to prevent stress in children.



“Look for the Helpers”

Remember that children can even be scared or emotionally overwhelmed by things we, as adults, might not find scary. For instance, commercials about the sick animals in an animal shelter or hungry children elsewhere in the world may alarm children. Fred Rogers famously said, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people helping.” You can help children reframe scary or sad situations by looking with them for the “helpers”—doctors, firefighters, veterinarians, volunteers. Looking for and talking about these helping people with children assures them that even during scary events, safe spaces and people can be found.

Learning Emotional Habits to Last a Lifetime

Emotions are a healthy response to stressful and scary situations. It is alright to cry or punch a pillow. However, every frustrating or scary event in a child’s life is also an opportunity to teach *emotional self-control* and a healthy style of coping. Think for a moment about athletes in the middle of a game. When the referee calls a foul on a player they all respond differently. One player might slam the ball down or yell mean words at the ref, while another player may shake his head in disbelief but continue to play the game in a respectful way. The first athlete responded in an immature way, while the second player responded maturely. We can show our children how to respond in a mature way to life’s challenges by teaching children healthy coping skills and modeling how to stay calm.

UW-Extension Family Living Programs

"Raising Kids, Eating Right, Spending Smart, Living Well"



For more information, please contact your county UW-Extension office:

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