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Tips for Helping Families and Children Cope with Tragic Events

With the surge of recent natural disasters, hate crimes and mass shootings, many questions are raised by children and adults, alike. Why are these events occurring? How can I feel safe? Is anyone really safe?

There are no easy answers to this kind of news, but it's important for parents to try to explain what has happened. Talking to your child about safety issues can help ease their fears and anxieties about their personal safety.

Children follow their parent's lead in terms of response to disasters and stress. This is a time with parent's modeling for their children is critical. Parents should admit their concerns to their children, and also stress their ability to cope with the situation.

Encourage children to talk about their concerns and express their feelings either verbally or through play. When talking with younger children remember to talk at their level. They may not understand the term "violence" but can talk about being afraid of a classmate who is mean to them.

Parents must be aware of their own feelings and response to a stressful event. Parents should seek out other adults to share their feelings with so that they are not blind-sided by their own feelings when helping their children.

Validate the child's feelings. Never minimize your child's concerns. Children should be assured that many people are working to protect them and keep them safe. Parents should not say that these events will never happen again.

Families should explore coping strategies that children can use to help manage and deal with their feelings. These would include fun activities and hobbies. As time goes on there are things that families can do together: send food, cards or such things as giving blood. This empowers and lets us do something active with our thoughts and feelings.

Empower children to take action regarding school safety. Encourage them to report specific incidents (bullying, threats, talk of suicide) and develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school. Explain why visitors sign in at the front office and why doors remain locked during the day. Help your child understand that these precautions are in place to protect them and ensure their safety.

If you find that news coverage of natural disasters and violence is significantly affecting the mood or behavior of your child, you may want to consider making an appointment with a WellSpan Employee Assistance Program provider. We are here to support you and your family through life's challenges.

Visit www.WellSpan.org/EAP to locate a provider convenient to you or call 1.800.673.2514 for assistance.