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A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Parenting in a Challenging World

Introduction

Parents want the world for their children. They strive to help them grow and thrive. A large part of their work is to protect their children from harm, because the safety of a child is a worry that never disappears. The task of keeping a child safe is a full-time job. But in spite of the care and best efforts by parents and others to keep a child safe, danger sometimes threatens. This danger may come from outside of the family, as an earthquake, flood, tornado, or school shooting, for example, or it may come from within the family, when violence occurs in the home. Sometimes, parents find themselves facing the limits of their ability to protect their child.

When the danger poses a threat of serious injury or death, it can become a source of psychological distress for the child. When this happens, we call it a traumatic event. By understanding how children experience a traumatic event and how they express distress about it, parents and families can help them through this challenging time. The ultimate goal is to restore balance to the family.

Providing a Protective Shield

Parents strive to protect their children from harm, and children expect that parents will protect them. Parents protect young children by keeping them close or by leaving them in the hands of experienced and familiar caregivers. For example, with a very young child, parents stay close and make sure they hold their child's hand when crossing the street. A parent's care and concern is a protective shield that helps keep a child from harm. Often, a parent will go to great lengths to keep a protective shield around a child, doing whatever is necessary to keep a child from danger.

As a child gets older, the way a parent provides protection changes. With a school-aged child, parents provide protection by teaching the child how to be safe in the world when the parent isn't around. For example, a parent will teach a child how to cross the street safely when alone, or give advice about how to stay out of trouble with friends. When a child becomes a teenager,



it becomes harder to protect him or her. Teenagers want to be mature and make their own decisions, even though their choices may not always be the safest choices. Parents worry about their teenagers when they start to drive or go to parties with little adult supervision.

The protective shield, which is designed to protect the child from harm, is always being reshaped. When danger becomes trauma, this protective shield can be broken, either through the child's separation from parents or through the parents' temporary inability to protect the child from danger.

It is important to take the time to step back and think about your own experience of your child's trauma and your own past traumas. After a traumatic event in the family, the parents and children feel the loss of this protective shield. For different members of the family, it may take different efforts and different amounts of time for this protective shield to be restored.

Taking Time to Reflect

As parents begin to cope with their child's traumatic event, the parents' own history of trauma and their feelings about their child's trauma influence how they react. For example, if a parent experienced the loss of a family member in the past, it will effect how they cope with their fear about their child's danger and make that experience feel even more intense. For this reason, after something bad has happened, it is important to take the time to step back and think about your own experience of your child's trauma and your own past traumas. Taking the time to consider your own personal experience can help you support your child after a trauma.

Taking the Event Seriously

Of course, parents recognize how serious a trauma is for their child. It's important that parents communicate to their child that they take very seriously what has happened and what it was like for their child.

Children can and do recover from a traumatic event, even when the event is very serious. Balance is the key in addressing traumatic events with children. It is

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important not to think that the trauma was so bad that the child may never recover. It is also important to take the child's reactions seriously and avoid telling the child that it wasn't so bad or thinking that it's OK to ignore the event and hope that the child forgets.

Appreciating Differences in Reactions

When a child experiences a traumatic event, all family members are affected. However, each family member may react differently from the others. For example, a parent who was with the child during the event may feel the event was more serious than the parent who was away from the child at the time and heard about the event second hand.

Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that each family member may have a different reaction to a traumatic event. The difference is due, in part, to different people's past traumatic experiences, and in part to how close they were to the event. It also has a lot to do with the fact that we are all individuals and deal with life events in our own ways.

Some family members may believe that ignoring or forgetting the event will allow their child to heal, while other family members may feel an intense need to talk about the event. Still other family members may consider the event so serious that they worry their child may never recover.

The fact that different family members respond in their own unique ways can actually aid the family in healing. For example, a mother who was present during her child's trauma might feel more protective of the child, restricting what the child is allowed to do away from home. She's working hard to protect her child. A father who was not present during the event might not feel as worried about the child's future safety. He may play the important role in the family of encouraging the child to venture out in the world again.

Different reactions to a traumatic event may also mean that family members will take different amounts of time to heal and recover from trauma. Developing an appreciation and respect for each other's course of recovery is one important step in helping the family heal.

Understanding the Course of Recovery

The world will appear different after a traumatic event. At times the world will appear more dangerous than before. However, people have a great ability to adjust to life-changing events, even if it seems hard to imagine. Each person is an individual and each family member exposed to a traumatic event will need to find their own way to accepting a different view of the world. This is part of the healing process. Respect for the different paces that family members take to reach this acceptance is an important piece of recovery for the family.

Acting as Partners in Recovery

In the end, for many people the path to a restored balance in their lives is through partnerships with others. They may find support in their spiritual beliefs or spiritual community, and many also find a rich source of support among their friends and family members.

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Adapted with permission: Gottlieb, A., Pynoos, R., and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Parents and Caregivers Advisory Group. (2005). *Parenting in a Challenging World*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. , National Child Traumatic Stress Network, November 2005, NCTSN.org