

early years are learning years

Discussing the News with 3- to 7-Year-Olds: What to Do?

This release was written by Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, a specialist in early childhood education, and posted to a number of early childhood listservs. It appears here with her permission.

After any important event occurs, the TV repetition makes sure the children will know something is going on that captures the attention of everyone. It is important, I think, that teachers and parents of young children allow them the time to express what is on their minds. (Unfortunately, some people think that the children, in their innocence, will not know about these world events. Considering this problem over the past 20 or more years, I haven't found that to be the case.)

The following recommendations are based on what I have done with children and would do this week about the current bombing situation with children 3 and up. (Please, if you are dealing with younger children, modify what I have written in ways you will know better than I do, perhaps just being physically warmer, rocking more, making sure they know you are taking good care of them.)

It is hard for most of us to move toward an awful subject like this, or death, or divorce, or earthquake or flood or...but the children need someone to help them unpack their thinking and their fears, and to help them know what the emergency plan, so to speak, is for them. (And always, it is, "Your grownups at home and your grownups at school know how to take care of you." I believe that young children never can hear this too much.)

In circle, if I had one, or with small groups repeatedly, until I got to everyone, I'd ask a provocative question, such as, "Did anyone hear anything about bombs?" and I'd leave rather a long silence. (Start counting and don't even think of saying anything before, say, 75.) Probably one child or more will have a great deal to say.

Let each of the children speak at length. (If you have children who talk long, and most/all want to speak, maybe break into two groups; if you teach with a partner, each one will wait less.) I like to make a chart as the children are telling their concerns. Sammy said his mom says Bin Ladin is a bad guy; Rosie said bombing is scary; etc., and the two groups can share their charts, or tell each other what was said later, or tomorrow.

Resist the temptation to correct errors as the children explain what they think is going on. Validate what they are feeling: "A lot of people feel that way."

Keep notes, and take a turn for yourself at the end...or at a later time that day, if the children are wiggly and need to do something else. You will want to be heard. (If postponing my turn, I'd say, "I also have some things to say about the bombings, but I'm going to do it after we've been outdoors and played.")

When it's your turn, tell them what you think is going on...don't turn attention to their errors, but tell the version you think is accurate. Do pay attention to their emotions, as stated and as you perceived them, and tell them that you know people are scared, etc., but the grownups will do what has to be done to make things get better.

If you have learned specifics, such as "My daddy says children in New York are getting bombed. I don't want to be bombed." then talk about:

1. Your parents are doing everything they can to keep you safe,
2. Would you like me to write down how you feel, and send that to the President?

You can scribe a letter for this child, and any other, saying what they feel, and sending to the proper recipient. Or suggest to the child, "You could make a pic-

ture about the bombing. You could show the scary stuff, or you could show how you want it to be, instead."

Your adult job, as I've described it here, is to reassure the child, provided your reassurance is true, that (in the present situation, and as far as you can see) s/he is safe and will be cared for. If the children are in danger, you must point out that all the adults (including you) are responsible not only for taking care of the danger, but for taking care of the children, and will do their very best.

Please consider sending home a letter telling the parents what you are doing. Please note that I'm not taking sides on any conflict in this posting, but I am taking the side of the children. They must not be left to feel that they are at risk; they must not be left to feel confused at what is going on; and they must learn that people express our concern for others in awful positions, putting our strong feelings into considered, appropriate action. (I don't know how I would advise a family who had someone they loved die in any of the bombings, and that makes me very sad, indeed. When anyone is made powerless, we all suffer.)

Please feel free to circulate this posting in any way that suits you, complete with my signature, below. I'd appreciate your letting me know if you do.

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