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Troubling Times

How Parents and Teachers Can Help Children Understand and Confront Adversity

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Parents and teachers sometimes find children preoccupied by very serious and worldly matters. Even young children will think about illness, death, war, the fury of Mother Nature, or the complexities of the human condition, and this may occur long before they are able to fully grasp the ideas and put them into perspective. The kinds of worries and fears that children grapple with become more frightening when the adults they know can be heard talking or possibly whispering about problems such as terrorism, gun violence, pandemics, or natural disasters. Indeed, disturbing occurrences (outbreaks, forest fires, hurricanes, evacuations, and so on) have affected countless numbers of adults and children around the globe. Children, and in particular those who are knowledgeable about news events, well-read, or astute, can experience troubling thoughts and feelings. Despite (or maybe because of) their intelligence or insightfulness they might find it difficult to cope with their fears and misgivings. They may see that many of their peers are far more focused on their own day to day activities, or they are not as interested in upsetting events. The adults in their lives may not be willing or adequately prepared to discuss matters with them. It can sometimes be a struggle for children to put their apprehension into words, to share concerns, to get past a sense of isolation, or to calm a gut feeling that for some reason (perhaps beyond anyone's comprehension) the world seems more troubled now.

Children may be young and comparatively inexperienced but that does not mean they lack sensitivity or the ability to understand matters, especially when given appropriate help to do so. Cognitive development is complicated, and people learn, grow, and come to comprehend things at different times in their lives—with depth, breadth, rate, and direction quite variable, and importantly dependent on an individual's opportunities to learn. This is also quite variable, as one might imagine. Parents and teachers have to recognize and respect this variability. Moreover, children are often motivated to learn more about whatever troubles them. Motivation is complex—there are different types, degrees, underlying reasons, and outcomes.

Adults should be careful not to dismiss or trivialize children's desire to learn or minimize their levels of understandings, but rather enable those understandings, ease their discomfort, and support their desire to learn more, even when a particular area of interest is one that is difficult for people to confront or reconcile. It is a good idea to provide suitable learning opportunities and resources while still acknowledging that some matters or circumstances are not always easily understood.

Parents and teachers who offer a safe and dependable environment, active listening, and open communication, are on track to support children's emotional well-being. Regardless of a child's age, temperament, ability, exceptionality or concern, adults should respond to individual development and to intense reactions to worldly occurrences by working honestly, and collaboratively with children to bring some sensibility to situations that may seem volatile or senseless. How can parents and teachers provide the kinds of support necessary to help children during troubling times?

To begin with it is important that adults wrestle with their own anxieties and emotional responses to adversity. This means thinking carefully about what is disturbing, and what strategies are useful to get past the worry or unsettling circumstances. Thoughtfully working through the process of how to deal with such matters can heighten awareness of how to help children cope with and overcome their troubling thoughts and concerns. Adults who ask themselves questions about what really matters to them and why, and how or if they can improve things, are better positioned to help children do the same. By establishing clear lines of communication between adults and children, and home and school, parents and teachers can help to shape children's perceptions in informed ways. However, remember that children may not think parents and teachers are approachable or receptive when perceived as upset, distracted, condescending, or harried and this can inhibit open dialogue and connectivity. Being approachable is the first step toward being approached.

What follows are numerous suggestions for effective, responsive adult-child interaction in times of trouble, and ways to promote children's emotional well-being. Although the strategies have been divided into two areas of focus (for parents and teachers) this is presented as such for purposes of reference simplicity, and we encourage flexible application of these recommendations in the context of home and school.

WAYS PARENTS CAN HELP CHILDREN

- Listen, really listen, to children's questions. Pay attention to their words, hear what they are asking, and be attuned to what they are *not* asking (but might want to know). Show genuine interest in their concerns.

- Value their opinions.
- Consider issues sensitively, one at a time. Be honest, and respond with only as much detail as the child is able to handle. Children's cognitive levels differ with age, development, and personal experience.
- Provide resources that are suited to a child's level of understanding. Stretch that by offering assistance, especially if the child is keen to learn more.
- Help children focus on what they *can* do to help a situation. For example, participating in hurricane readiness or relief efforts, or local fundraising initiatives. This kind of involvement, when age-appropriate, can prevent children from becoming fixated on finding solutions that are beyond their capacity due to age and expertise.
- Emphasize the joys, reason, and goodness within the world.
- Emphasize the resilience of people.
- Discuss the importance of tolerance and relationship-building. There are many resources available in print and online, and educators and librarians can work with you to find those that best fit the individual and situation at hand.
- Be sure to take stock of your own feelings before attempting to address children's concerns. This will help to ensure that you are and will remain calm.
- Encourage children to play. They should continue to be active and to maintain balance in their lives. They may need to be reassured that if they have fun it does not mean they lack sensitivity to the misfortune of others.
- Help children to appreciate the value of self-expression in the form of art, music, or journal or poetry writing. These can be wonderful outlets for conveying feelings, and also serve as springboards for discussion.
- Try to have conversations about matters that are anxiety provoking only at those times when everyone is relatively relaxed. Choose a comfortable space, and ample time for open dialogue and respectful listening.
- When children are deeply troubled and cannot be calmed, consider consulting with a professional who has some expertise in working with those who are highly intelligent or sensitive, and who has experience in providing psychological services.
- Maintain a sense of constancy, with continued nurturing and ongoing attention to daily routines.
- Respect the fact that sometimes children do not want to share their ideas. A warm hug or a few quiet moments can be very comforting, too.
- Help children steer clear of excessive exposure to conflict, violence, or human suffering on television or in the media. Acknowledge that there are

troubles in the world but explain that it is not constructive to focus on it too much.

- Help children find ways to make wise choices in their efforts to contribute to the community through religious, recreational, or character education programs that may be offered in the neighborhood. Positive action and opportunities to connect with others serves the greater good and strengthens society.
- Fortify family ties and reinforce friendships. During times of trouble, a strong social support system can make a big difference to a child.

WAYS TEACHERS CAN HELP CHILDREN

- Listen patiently to children and ask them what they want to learn more about, and what concerns or uncertainties they might have. Incorporate this as may be fitting into classroom discussion times, and infuse it delicately into the instructional framework.
- Ensure that children actually feel that that are being listened to. (If you're not sure about this, ask them!)
- Encourage children to express their feelings, concerns, and ideas for solutions in a variety of ways. Help them to brainstorm together, and recognize accomplishment and thoughtfulness. Teach them how to create concept maps, design group responses, support one another's choices, and work collaboratively on relevant tasks.
- Explain the connections between real-world and curriculum-based learning.
- Break problems down into smaller components or steps. Find out what children already know about a concern or situation, how they acquired the information, and whether it is accurate. Determine what they still want to know. Deal with matters one aspect at a time. Both during and after any learning, help children reflect on what they have come to know, and how that makes them feel. Be alert to any emotional ups and downs that present themselves (sadness, discouragement, relief, and other emotions).
- Consider how aspects of troubling circumstances are being productively addressed. For example, focus on the many ways in which hurricane relief management and response processes have improved as a result of past devastation. Show children how to think in positive ways.
- Build confidence and positive expectations by enabling children to work at their individual levels of understanding, and by modeling good coping and problem solving skills.

- Help children realize and accept their limitations, including recognizing that they cannot be expected to fix major or global problems. They can, however, take on some leadership roles, and take responsibility for and pride in their involvement in helpful school-wide or classroom oriented initiatives. Assist them in setting productive and reasonable goals about what they can and cannot do about certain circumstances
- Stay attuned to the world of children. This includes what is happening in their online venues, in the music they listen to, on the playground, in the hallways, at the movies, and so on.
- Try to maintain a sense of humour—even when times are troubling.
- Security and predictability matter. Be trustworthy. Be available when you say you will be—and beyond then, too.
- Find resources that personalize and give voice to those who have been affected by unsettling events (such as hurricanes, tsunamis, street violence, etc.). Help children appreciate and understand some of the many true stories that have been told, and to focus on the strengths and courage conveyed. Consider setting up communication networks with children and classrooms in communities in other locales so as to offer support and encouragement.
- Select literature that builds understandings of persistence, bravery, and ways to confront challenge, suffering, or loss.
- Respect, accept and, most importantly, *value* curiosity-driven learning.
- Discuss government policies and plans, volunteerism, good citizenship, and social activist projects. Point out ways in which people can and do contribute to society, embark on new beginnings, and make a difference to others (and particularly those in need). There are lots of organizations to contact as well, and useful information can be accessed from agencies responsible for tracking weather patterns, institutes that offer environmental strategies, associations that deal with disaster preparedness, health centers, youth groups, businesses, psychological service providers, and charitable organizations such as UNICEF, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and many others.
- Keep explanations clear and be mindful of the child's intellectual ability and emotional competence. Better to be brief than boring.
- Be particularly sensitive to children who have previously experienced a traumatic event, who have a history of emotional problems, who lack friends with whom to share ideas, or who show signs of undue stress. (This includes sleeplessness, eating disorders, mood swings, academic decline, a change in activity level, substance abuse, or behaviour that is markedly out of step in

relation to age peers.) If anxiety interferes with a child's daily functioning then professional consultation might be warranted. Parent-teacher communication is especially important.

- Help build emotional intelligence among all members of the school community. Consider it a part of the curriculum and program (and advocate for such programming) accordingly. Educators who model and teach good coping skills send positive messages that help affirm a child's sense of self.
- Network and communicate regularly with others in children's lives, such as parents and extra-curricular instructors. Find out about resources, community-based and online support groups, guidance services, and other possible avenues for the provision of comfort and support.

During times of trouble, when emotions run high, parents and teachers can help children develop the skills necessary to manage their feelings, to confront unpleasant or adverse realities, and to acquire greater emotional stability. In order to support children in better understanding their world, adults may have to help them come to terms with circumstances that are frightening, confusing, overwhelming, or possibly unrelated to their past experience. By providing a safe and supportive environment and a healthy acceptance of all that is good in life, a calm and ready-to-listen adult can facilitate children's well-being, and help to alleviate the fear, dismay or confusion they may feel. In doing so, it is important to honour and nurture children's sensitivity. Although parents and teachers cannot shelter children from all adversity, they are well positioned to help children learn about the imbalances in the world, to better comprehend their impact, and to find thoughtful ways to strike a comfortable and meaningful balance of their own.

Being Smart about Gifted Education, 2nd Edition: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents (Great Potential Press, 2009), is an award-winning book also written by Canadian authors Dona J. Matthews and Joanne F. Foster.