

Helping Children to Cope with Media Coverage of Traumatic Events

By Sonja Tansey

In recent years many traumatic events around the world have attracted high media attention. Disastrous events such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, the Bali bombings and the Boxing Day Tsunami have sparked intense media coverage. Children can easily be exposed to traumatic events such as these through television, radio, the internet, newspapers and magazines. Children can also be exposed to these types of events by talking to family and friends and hearing conversations between others.

Children can be negatively affected by exposure to media coverage of tragic events in their community or in other states and countries. While staff and carers in children's services are aware of the difficulty in protecting children from graphic media portrayals, there are ways to minimise the negative impact that they can have on children.

Developing strong attachments and relationships, and creating safe environments will help children to feel secure regardless of the trauma featured. Implementing simple strategies such as reassuring children that they are safe and responding

sensitively and appropriately to their questions and discussions can assist children who have been disturbed by media reports. Observing and understanding individual children's responses to coverage of traumatic events will also help staff and carers to support children.

What types of events reported in the media may affect children?

Media reports of traumatic events cover a vast range of issues that can cause children to become frightened and anxious. Terrorist acts, war, mass murders, celebrity deaths, natural disasters, famine, poverty and epidemics are issues that gain regular media attention. Individual children react differently to the range of issues reported in the media. The ways and extent to which children react is influenced by their development, temperament, resilience and life experiences. For example, some children may find images of war disturbing and may withdraw from play activities, others may act out what they have seen in their play and use violence to solve conflict.

How can media reports affect children?

Children have naturally egocentric tendencies, making it difficult for them to understand that a tragic event occurring elsewhere will not harm them. Younger children may fear that these events will be ongoing and that they may be responsible for the event. They can also find it difficult to separate reality from fantasy. This can create confusion when exposed to media reports of traumatic events. Older children are more likely to be upset by the details of media reports because they understand that the events are real, and they may also be able to identify the places and people affected.

Sometimes children can be traumatised by media reports of tragic events. Trauma can also negatively affect children's psychological and emotional wellbeing and can have long term effects on their development.

Nightmares, fear, anxiety and the development of post-traumatic stress are reactions experienced by children when exposed to



graphic media reports. Staff and carers should be aware of changes in children's behaviour such as withdrawal and loss of interest in activities or becoming overly preoccupied with traumatic events. Observing children for physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches is also important.

Violent acts such as war, crime, terrorism and murder are regularly reported in the media. Research suggests that regular exposure to violence in the media can increase the risk that children will use violence to solve their own conflicts. It can also result in children becoming desensitised and uncaring about violence in their own environment. Alternatively children can develop an exaggerated and fearful view of the world.

How can we protect children from disturbing media reports?

The most important way to protect children from media reports of traumatic events is by limiting their exposure. Protecting children from television, newspaper, radio and internet programs that provide graphic reports can limit their contact with issues and images they are unable to deal with.

Minimising and controlling children's exposure to reports of traumatic events can be difficult for staff and carers in children's services. Regardless of efforts made by services and families, children can still be exposed to disturbing media reports. Media headlines such as 'School yard massacre' or 'Homes destroyed by fire' can be announced on television or radio without warning or displayed prominently on the front page of newspapers.

Limiting children's exposure to harmful media

Staff and carers can try to limit children's exposure to harmful media by developing policies and procedures around the use of technology in the child care service such as television, radio and the internet. Services can also provide information to families about protecting children from graphic media.

A useful resource for developing policies and informing families is the Young Media Australia website. This is a national advocacy organisation that represents the interests of children and young people in relation to print, electronic and screen-based media.

Common reactions in younger children to traumatic events include:

- sleeping problems
- changes in toileting and eating habits
- regressive or 'babyish' behaviour
- behavioural changes such as becoming more withdrawn, clingy, angry or violent
- separation anxiety
- changes in relationships with peers and siblings such as becoming more competitive or aggressive
- reliving traumatic events through play and drawings

Common reactions in older children to traumatic events include:

- sleeping problems, including nightmares
- physical symptoms such as headache and stomach ache
- not wanting to go to school
- behavioural changes, for instance, becoming withdrawn or having problems at school
- regressive or 'babyish' behaviour
- drop in performance at school
- changes in behaviour with staff, carers and parents

(adapted from www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

Internet safety

The World Wide Web is an unregulated medium that poses significant risks in exposing children to inappropriate and disturbing media coverage of traumatic events. It is the responsibility of staff and carers to closely monitor and guide children's safe use of the internet.

Services can provide a safe internet environment for children by using internet blocking or filtering software. Content trackers can also be useful as they allow adults to see which sites children have visited.

However, these tools do not guarantee complete internet safety, so staff and carers should closely monitor children at all times when using the internet. Computers should be located in an area and position that can be easily supervised.

How do we support children who have been exposed to disturbing media reports?

It is inevitable at one point or another that children will be exposed to some extent to the onslaught of media coverage or traumatic events that occurs regularly. Staff and carers in children's services need to reassure children that they are safe and that these events are unlikely to happen to them. Ongoing emotional difficulties for children, although uncommon, can be prevented when steps are taken to support children who have been exposed to traumatic events in the media.

Providing a caring and consistent environment that allows the development of strong attachments and relationships will enhance children's sense of safety, security and belonging. Open, supportive communication that is appropriate to individual children's level of understanding, is crucial for monitoring children's reactions and helping them to deal with traumatic media reports.

Staff and carers in services can reassure children and provide a healthy perspective on tragic events in the media. Problems can be allayed through addressing rather than avoiding difficult issues, thoughts and feelings expressed by children. This will create a flow of communication that will help children to feel at ease when raising issues and expressing concerns. It is important to refer children, families, staff and carers to relevant professionals such as psychologists or counselors for support if they display signs of anxiety, grief or depression. Local community health agencies and family doctors can be useful in providing immediate and long term assistance and counselling.

Staff and carers can help children to continue to feel positive about the world by showing them that the world is a safe and enjoyable place to live. Reinforcing values such as caring for others, sharing and taking turns, and teaching respect for the beliefs of others can also help children feel safe and secure.

If a traumatic event occurs within the vicinity of the service, such as a bushfire or road accident, it is important to show children how the service works to prevent these events. For example, by discussing and carrying out fire safety measures with the children and talking with children about wearing seatbelts and crossing the road safely.

Tips for protecting children from disturbing media reports

- limit or avoid the use of television in the service
- decide what news is appropriate for children to see or hear
- minimise children's exposure to inappropriate news programs
- use DVDs or videos that have non violent content and a 'G' rating as an alternative to television and the internet
- install internet safety software
- avoid discussing media reports with other adults whilst children are near
- discuss program content and appropriate media use with children
- provide information to families about the dangers to children when exposed to media reports

Tips for creating positive experiences through media reports

- encourage older children to access news sources such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Behind the News* program or Network 10's *the total news (ttn)* which is aimed at upper primary and lower secondary students
- use appropriate news programs to show children positive things about the world, and to encourage a sense of belonging and social responsibility
- follow news events with children that positively contribute to their learning. For example, human interest stories, environmental issues, wildlife protection, sporting events

Supporting younger children

It can be easier to protect very young children and babies from graphic media reports. However, babies and toddlers can be intuitively affected by the responses of adults to the events reported in the media. Staff and carers should try to stay calm around babies and toddlers and maintain normal routines as much as possible.

What if staff and carers are distressed by media reports?

Adults can also be deeply affected by exposure to media coverage of traumatic events. However, it is important that staff and carers manage their responses to these events to make sure they can support and respond to children's needs. Consistent, stable care is crucial for helping children deal with emotional stress.

Watching out for team members and being aware of their own thoughts and feelings can help staff and carers monitor reactions and seek support if needed.

Staff and carers should not lose sight of children's needs even when they are feeling stressed themselves. Children are very sensitive to adult reactions and feelings so it is important not to talk about traumatic events in front of children too often or too dramatically. Individuals should take time out to think about and cope with their own feelings. Seeking professional support through health agencies and counsellors is useful for managing responses towards tragic events portrayed in the media.

Appropriate exposure to media

While inappropriate exposure to media reported events poses potential risks to children's health and wellbeing, older children in particular should have opportunities to begin to learn about their world through current issues and events. Staff, carers and families play a key role in ensuring that children are supported when they watch, hear or read about media reported events. Adults need to assist children to begin to develop an appropriate understanding and response to this information.

Children under the age of six have a limited capacity to understand and cope with media reported information. Staff and carers must carefully consider the introduction of any news media into the care environment. This must also be clearly discussed with, and approved by, each child's family. Any access to media reported information by children under six years

of age must be closely supervised. Staff and carers should be prepared to support children's understanding of and ability to cope with media reported news. Talking honestly and supportively with children about what they have seen, heard or read will limit the negative impact of media reports and help them to feel safe.

Older children, particularly those aged between six and ten, can be significantly affected by exposure to media reports. Children in this age group often lack the ability to assess whether they will be affected by an event they learn about through the media. They may believe that the event will happen to them. It is therefore crucial that staff and carers:

- watch, listen to or read media information with children
- discuss the information with children and ask them how they feel about what they have learned
- choose news sources that avoid 'sensationalism'. Where possible access news sources that have been developed specifically for children
- set clear guidelines for children's access to news sources while at the service.

Staff and carers have a duty of care to ensure children's safety and wellbeing while they are in care. Where children have access to media resources in the service, carers and staff must ensure that children are protected from the potential harm that exposure to inappropriate information may cause ■

References and further reading

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- Young Media Australia. (n.d.). *Watching the TV News factsheet*. Retrieved 27 February 2007 from http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/01_13_TVNews.htm

Useful websites

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation *Behind the News* program - www.abc.net.au/tv/btn
- Better Health Channel - www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Cyber Smart Kids Online - www.cybersmartkids.com.au
- Network 10 *the total news* program - www.news.com.au/ttn/
- Netty's World - www.nettysworld.com.au