

Tips for Media Covering Child Trauma

Members of the press provide many essential services when covering traumatic events. Most importantly, you provide information about the event and what individuals can do in the face of the situation (?? Not sure I like this wording, but protecting themselves doesn't feel right either). The press can be a critical part of the “protective shield” that helps avert panic following a traumatic event, like mass violence, a disaster, or terrorism.

Media coverage of traumatic events must be executed with care. Some issues associated with trauma are so sensitive, people may be hurt in very personal, intimate ways. Because of this, the press can help or can unintentionally add harm to harm. For example, after 9/11 experts said repeated viewing of television images of the “twin towers” coming down could be re-traumatizing to Americans directly and indirectly involved. This information would have been important for the public to understand in making personal decisions about television viewing.

Events that happen on an individual level, such as a child sexual abuse, can also be traumatic for communities (can you provide a recent example?). News coverage of these events can do both good and harm. Again, journalists have the opportunity and the responsibility to reduce potential harm and promote strength for both individuals and communities.

The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress has prepared the following guidelines for reporters, producers, and editors to help enhance responsible news coverage of stories that involve child traumatic stress.

Safety First

- **Provide information that enhances protection.** Just as children look to their parents to provide a protective shield against danger and harm, families look to their communities and government to provide similar security. The press is perhaps the greatest conduit of such information. Traumatic events, particularly terrorist actions, can threaten a basic sense of safety. They can weaken faith and trust in the effectiveness of official responses, and our social institutions. Families search for ways to better protect their children. It is important for news sources to inform the public about specific steps that community and government leaders are taking to protect them.

- **Tell the public about safety plans.** When parents are more informed about risks and plans for protection, they are better able to address questions children may raise about personal, family, and community safety. By providing information about safety plans being initiated, news professionals can increase families' abilities to respond in an effective manner. Furthermore, when the media takes pro-active steps to educating communities about plans *prior* to an event, individual families and, indeed, the general public's ability to respond in the face of an event is increased. With this knowledge and awareness comes a sense of control; the media can play an important role in strengthening communities' ability to prepare for and respond to traumatic events.
- **Help restore a predictable order.** Family's and community's sense of safety can be further undermined when there is a breakdown in a sense of order. Traumatic events significantly impact such order. Children are particularly vulnerable to increased distress when their world is unpredictable. The media can be instrumental in helping to restore order after a traumatic event. Providing education about the importance of re-establishing routine, even in the smallest of ways, can aid in increased feelings of safety. Stories which highlight ways that families, schools, and communities seek to restore some degree of predictability can help the recovery process.

Manage Exposure

Media information is critical to public awareness. However, it is important for families to manage exposure to the media coverage of traumatic events. As the media informs about events, so too can it educate families about how the coverage may impact on viewers, especially children.

- **Educate about exposure.** Reading or watching coverage of a traumatic event, such as 9-11, may produce stress reactions. Stories can be considered a reminder of the original event, and reactions may be similar. Media may wish to consider sidebar stories explaining potential reactions to coverage of a traumatic event. These may aid viewers/readers in better understanding their possible responses to difficult material as well as helping them make informed decisions about how they manage their exposure.
- **Recognize that repeated images may exacerbate stress reactions. As reporters and editors consider the goal to be achieved by each story, it is important to also consider if the goal is helped or hindered with repeated images of the traumatic event. Research indicates that repeated exposure to images is associated with increased traumatic stress reactions for years after the event. Consider making judicious use of images to inform, thus reducing the potential stress on the audience.**

- Encourage parents to regulate children’s media exposure. News stories, particularly those with graphic detail, may be accompanied by a brief commentary (i.e., “the following is graphic in nature and may be upsetting to young viewers/readers”). Such a message may help parents to pause and think about the impact of exposure for their children.
- Timing. It is often said that timing is everything. Certainly, this applies to news coverage. When covering anniversaries of traumatic events such as 9-11, it is important to consider the timing of pieces on television and radio. Consider the timing of stories containing graphic images or excessive reminders of the event, perhaps slating these for airing at times less likely to be seen/heard by children. Again, media may wish to consider a brief warning prior to airing the story to alert parents of the nature of the story and the possible inappropriateness for young viewers.

Keep in Mind

- Recovery varies. After a traumatic event, children vary in their healing and recovery. Reporters should bear in mind that re-living painful events and details, with a focus on loss and suffering may increase the likelihood of traumatic reactions. In sum, media coverage has the potential to interfere with the healing process.
- Children’s expectations. Generally, children attempt to be helpful to reporters. When discussing a loss or re-living an event, they may be concerned about doing a good job. They may also provide information they believe the reporter wants to hear, rather than their true thoughts.
- Gain permission. Whenever possible, help families make informed choices about interviews. Provide them with the purpose and the content of the story. Be sure to obtain parental permission before interviewing the child; have a family member present.

The following are important, but I see these more for families to consider than for media. I would have them posted on a site about media and the family not for reporters. I am working on this as we speak. Encourage parents to talk about the

news with their children. Young children may overestimate their risk and bring the danger closer to home. Clarifications to correct misunderstanding and confusion can be reassuring. It is important to find out what children are worried about and discuss the worries with them. Let them know that you want to help.

Reduce re-traumatizing images and messages. After the Oklahoma City bombings, many children who were 100 miles away but who watched media coverage of the events had symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder up to five years later. Continued coverage of carnage is upsetting to adults, and especially upsetting to children.

Be sensitive. Consider the time of day you present graphic images. Warn parents to restrict viewing at times when children are likely to be viewing TV. In addition, interviewing victims can further exacerbate the trauma.

Promote Resilience and Recovery

Foster preparedness and resilience. In the same way that we strive to protect and strengthen critical aspects of the nation's infrastructure by making them more resilient, we can focus on making children and families more resilient by strengthening family preparedness, and by fostering coping, support and communication among children and parents.

Foster community supports. Individuals and families can build, maintain and use social support systems of family, friends, community organizations and agencies, faith-based institutions or other resources.

Assess the likelihood of threats. People can react to the remote possibility of a specific horrific event, commonly triggered by media coverage, with a cycle of fear and confusion about unseen risks that are hard to judge. Fear can be contagious. One protective strategy is to learn and teach about the likelihood of biological, chemical or radiological threats.

Address community disaster response plans. In the same way that the government develops a risk assessment and preparedness plan, families can assess their risk based on where they live (such as near a nuclear power plant, military base or other identified risk area). It is then important for families to develop a family safety plan that identifies specific risks and appropriate preparedness and response. Parents should learn about their community preparedness and response plans for different types of disasters. Parents should also learn what the emergency plans and resources are at their workplace, child's school/day care, including plans for pick up, evacuation and reunion plans, plans for medical care, and provision for children with special needs.

Normalize Traumatic Stress Reactions

Tell the public what reactions to expect. Individuals and families can suffer the severe and persistent psychological consequences of trauma and loss, resulting in fear,

posttraumatic stress reactions and traumatic grief. Children may be at higher risk for serious psychological reactions from direct exposure to traumatic situations and loss. For those without direct exposure or loss from a traumatic event, psychological consequences to children and families include fear and uncertainty about risks and dangers.

Let individuals and families know about traumatic stress reactions. The process of recovering from traumatic experiences and significant losses can take months or years, and for some children and adolescents their daily lives can be disrupted by intrusive memories of the trauma, grief reactions, and symptoms of depression. As a general rule of thumb, if a child's responses (e.g. nightmares, recurrent thoughts or fears) have been getting worse instead of better over time, they should consider seeking a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that parents should consider seeking help for a child or adolescent from a mental health professional include: withdrawal from friends or family, lack of participation in family activities; school refusal for a period of weeks or months, or marked deterioration in ability to concentrate leading to diminished grades; preoccupation with fear, grief, or guilt to the exclusion of talking or thinking about anything else; fear of leaving the house or doing usual activities; dropping out of sports or other social activities; and isolation from peers.