



Taming the Terrible Moments in Life

by David L. Sibley

With the development of our electronic media, our children are exposed to community, national and world crisis events with lightning speed. During these times, we hear a lot about the impact these events have on our children. Much is said about helping children deal with their **feelings of fear, anxiety, helplessness, and confusion.**

But what the media fails to report is that children throughout our country are no strangers to these feelings! Thousands of our children who are growing up with divorce, stepfamilies, child abuse and endangerment, drug and alcohol abuse in their homes, gangs, community violence, poverty, absentee parents – and so much more – experience liberal amounts of such feelings every day. And the numbers of such children in ALL our communities is growing!

When crisis happens, parents and other caring adults struggle with this question:

**How can I help the children I care about feel safe
and protected in the midst of this crisis?**

In response, experts wisely advise us to help our children by providing them with an atmosphere of safety and love, encouraging them to talk openly about what happened, and allowing them to express their feelings. **In Confident Kids, we have known the importance of this all along. For more than 20 years now, creating a safe environment for children (and their parents) who have been terrorized by their life circumstances has been a primary goal of our program.** Here are some tips we recommend.

1. Accept the painful, scary, threatening side of life. It is difficult to watch our children suffer from having experienced the adult realities of our world too soon. After all, isn't it our job to protect them from this side of life? But, try as we will, life happens anyway. Parents get divorced; lives are ruined by drugs/alcohol; jobs are lost; fires, earthquakes, and tornadoes take homes; terrorists attack – and through our ever present media, our children feel the brunt of it all. In reality, adults will NEVER be able to protect our children from the harsh realities of growing up in our world. Once we accept that, we are better positioned to let go of guilt and help to our kids.



2. See the crisis through our children's eyes. We can never truly help our children deal with crisis until we embrace this truth: **Children experience a crisis differently than adults.** That may sound like a no-brainer, but the biggest mistake adults make in helping kids is assuming (often subconsciously) that children experience and deal with crisis in the same manner as adults. Perhaps the biggest difference is that children communicate with their BEHAVIOR, more than their words. Knowing what to expect is helpful:

Six years and younger. This is the “me” group. Their world consists of themselves and their family. They will ask questions like: “Am I going to be safe?” “Did I do something wrong?” “Will my Daddy and Mommy be okay?” Expect them to become clingy, have nightmares and separation anxiety; and possibly regress to earlier behaviors like bed-wetting.

Seven to twelve years. This group is more likely to ask “how” and “why” questions: “How can we protect ourselves?” “Why did (daddy, terrorists, etc.) do this to us?” “How can we fix it?” Expect their behavior to be much the same as the younger group, but more intense. They may not want to go to school, experience headaches and/or stomachaches, and will use play to express their fantasies.

Teen years. Their key question: “What does this mean?” Their thinking is more global, however their internalization is still personal: “I never expected this to happen to ME.” Expect behaviors such as rebellion, avoidance, hyperactivity, a sharp decline in school performance; loss of interest in once-loved activities and other forms of acting-out behavior.

3. Tell them the truth. The biggest mistake parents and other caring adults make is to try to protect their children by withholding information. In reality, children need three things to handle the terrible moments in their lives:

Information. Without factual, reliable information, children will fill in the gaps with their own perceptions and worst fears. Tell your children what is true, but with no more detail than needed. Most importantly, keep any of your own hostility or bitterness to yourself, especially toward a parent or an ethnic group.

Listening. Timing is everything! Continue to make yourself available, but don't force a conversation. Wait until the child is ready. When they are ready to talk, give them your focused attention and just LISTEN. Bite your tongue, if needed, to repress your impulse to rush in and “fix” their feelings. Let them simply pour out their thoughts and feelings as you continue to give them your focused attention.

Validation. Validation is saying **YES**. “Yes, this happened. Yes, it hurts. Yes, it's not fair. Yes, your perceptions of this are right. Yes, your feelings are real and appropriate for this situation.” Offer reassurances that, in spite of what happened, they are loved and will be taken care of. Don't forget to remind them that although it may not seem like it, God is still in control and will care for them, too.

4. Build a support system. People in pain tend to feel isolated and alone, and often do not want to see or be with anyone. However, now is the time children and parents need to be surrounded by



their support system. Parents - whether you feel like it or not, make the effort to reach out to caring friends, family and the church community. Other caring adults – stay with the children and family yourself and encourage them to reach out to others.

5. Take care of YOU. Another natural tendency of parents and, often, other caring adults is to set aside their own needs to care for the children. However, if you have been traumatized too, the best thing you can do for them is to care of yourself. Pay attention to your own mental and emotional state, and don't be afraid to do what is necessary to facilitate your own healing. This is important not only for your own health, but because you cannot adequately care for children until your own needs are cared for. Be aware that children will react to *your* emotional state, often making your feelings and reactions their own. In effect, if you try to ignore your own needs, they will experience a double trauma; theirs and yours.

6. As much as possible, maintain a “normal” lifestyle throughout the time of healing. It is true that emotional stress takes a physical toll, and during times of crisis parents need to give themselves permission to slow down. However, they must also remember that daily routines and family traditions facilitate healing by assuring children that things are under control. Going to school, participating in sports or scouts, having friends over, celebrating birthdays and holidays, visiting family and friends – are all important to healing.

7. Relax in the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we have the wonderful assurance that when all is said and done, it is committing our children to God's care that is our greatest gift to them. **Knowing that God will give our children protection and safety beyond what we ever could, is our greatest comfort of all.**

Warning Signs That Normal Healing Is Not Happening

With guidance, children are wonderfully able to tame the terrible moments in life. However, adults need to always be watchful for signs that the children may need some extra help. Look for these signs:

- **Extreme anxiety that does not seem to be easing.**
- **Irrational fears especially about being away from parents.**
- **Prolonged loss of appetite or interest in normal activities.**
- **Physically harming themselves or others.**

If in doubt about the meaning of a child's behavior, seek help from a trained mental health professional.