

Speaking Out

When Children See the Worst

Dawn Pozzi

On Tuesday, a tragedy unfolded in the 19th Ward when Chris Rogers was murdered within sight of a child care center and playground. Sadly, this kind of violence is all too common in our world. We adults are horrified and those of us who live near the scene will be taking extra care and paying more attention to our surroundings. We can talk about what we feel and can take measures that help us feel safe. Unless this particular death has closely touched us, our lives will return to normal.

Over the past decade, Children's Institute has studied the effects of exposure to violence on young children, and has developed materials for parents and for professionals that can help them help their children. Research has consistently shown that witnessing violence and its aftermath may affect young children for years to come. When that exposure is repeated over several separate incidents, or when it is chronic as it is in violent neighborhoods or homes, it may lay the groundwork for later behavioral and emotional problems.

From research and from experience, we know that young children who are exposed to violence often feel frightened, sad, angry and alone. The younger they are, the fewer resources they have to deal with trauma. Young children do not understand the facts of what happened and may have exaggerated ideas about the incidents. They may personalize the events and fear that harm may come to them or to the people they love and depend on. Young children do not have many words to express what they feel, have an incomplete understanding of cause and effect, and have little control over their own physical safety.

Often our instinct is to protect them, to cover over what happened and not talk with them about it, hoping that they will soon forget and believing that it is best not to encourage them to think about it. Sometimes we even tell children that there's no reason to be afraid and that it is silly to feel that way. Our hearts go out to them; we are angry that they had to witness such a terrible event and want to protect them. Many adults do not know what to do to help children exposed to violence.

There are things adults may say and do to help a child get through a traumatic experience. Children need to have their fears recognized. They need to be assured that the adults they love and depend on are safe and will take care of them. They need extra time and affection from the adults in their lives.

Signs that a child is troubled by exposure to a violent event are as varied as the individual children themselves. Some children may be quiet and withdrawn; others will act out aggressively or imitate the event in their play. Many show fear of separation from their parents, don't want to go to school or child care, and may have nightmares or be afraid to go to sleep. When the fears surface and they are afraid to go to bed or leave the house, patience and understanding is the best response. If they act out or physically strike out, understand that they

are afraid, angry and trying to deal with these strong feelings. They need to know that violence is not okay and there are better ways to deal with feelings. Calm and predictable routines and boundaries at home, school or child care will help them to feel safe. It is also important that adults provide simple, honest answers, such as, “Yes, the police were there because someone was hurt.”

The fears may come up again and again, even after it seems they should be over it, and once again patience and love are the responses that will make them feel safe again. In cases where a child seems to be very upset or when the symptoms last for a long time, parents may need to consider consulting a mental health professional.

Children’s Institute offers materials for parents and teachers in addition to training on how to improve the response to children and families who have witnessed violence or are living in a violent setting. For more information and tips on helping children who are exposed to violence, visit www.childrensinstitute.net.

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