

Too hard to handle

Helping children understand difficult sights, sounds of 9/11

By Valerie Kuklenski, Staff Writer
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For anyone watching television five years ago Monday, the images were shocking and deeply disturbing. Seeing them again as the anniversary of Sept. 11 is marked can reawaken those same horrific fears in any viewer.

But what about children, those who may have been too young at the time to take in the significance of the terrorist attacks, but now may be old enough to begin exploring this history lesson?

Expert opinions vary on what age is appropriate to begin discussion about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Washington, D.C. But most agree that children in elementary school should be sheltered from the most vivid footage of the events.



"I would prefer that preschool and elementary children actually not watch anything (depicting 9/11) on TV. It becomes real to everyone and then it's too hard to handle," says Charlotte Reznick, an educational psychologist and former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology. "If you want to use it as a history lesson to tell what happened five years ago, I would much prefer talking about it without pictures."

Much of the TV programming airing through Monday contains graphic images, including the documentary "9/11," by Gedeon and Jules Naudet, with footage of the trade center collapsing from inside the structure, suicide jumpers and seriously injured survivors.

However, there are some 9/11 programs tailored to young viewers, among them TLC's "Camp 9/11: Children of Hope," about children who lost a parent that day and now share their experiences at a special camp; and the Disney Channel movie "Tiger Cruise," about a Navy daughter who accepts an invitation for a family cruise with her dad, and then is caught up in his aircraft carrier's response to 9/11. Both have aired recently, and "Tiger Cruise" is available on DVD.

Los Angeles psychologist Robert Butterworth says one factor of 9/11 that parents must keep in mind is that the problem causing the fear and uneasiness has not been resolved.

Because of the continuing threat of terrorism, he says, parents should at least discuss the attacks with children as young as 10 in order to help them understand new developments, such as the recently foiled British plot, and also to help them face whatever lies ahead.

"9/11 is not an isolated incident," Butterworth said. "You have to deal with the fact that it may not be over. So that's one of the reasons why you have to educate kids about what happened and what could happen."

Laurel Murray of Westlake Village said her children, Rowena, now 16, and Duncan, 11, were aware of the attacks when they happened because it was Rowena who first heard about it on the radio.

She is sure they will see some 9/11 anniversary coverage in the coming days but is uncertain whether it will spark discussions about terrorism.

"I think terrorism is something that is so beyond frightening that they compartmentalize it and they don't deal with it," Murray said.

"I think back to the air raid drills we used to do when we were kids," she said. "That was sort of a fun thing. I never felt threatened when we did that."

"This is so different. They are inundated with television, and they're encouraged to read newspapers. There really is no escaping it except in their own little minds where they can tuck it away and worry about what they're having for lunch."

Butterworth said the anniversary should be used as a teaching tool, at home if not in classrooms.

"The images have to be curtailed, but the information shouldn't be."

He said younger children won't understand broader issues of terrorism, but they might dwell on specifics, such as questions about the pain 9/11 victims suffered from falling or being in a fire.

"They don't have censors on what they're afraid of," Butterworth said. "With older kids, teenagers, you get a different reaction. You're not going to get so much trauma and shock. You're going to get anger."

Teens are likely to accuse adults of not doing enough to make the world less dangerous.

"And you say, 'Maybe you're right. Maybe you have to get more involved and make it a better world because we haven't.' Teenagers react more to things, like, 'What can we do?' It's more anger and action than fear and contemplation," he said.

Reznick and Butterworth agree that children of all ages who are concerned about the attacks may benefit from even small gestures, such as writing a letter or drawing a picture for children in New York City who were directly affected by 9/11 or, for older students, discussing cultural differences with an aim of greater understanding.

An airline trip can also be a positive lesson, as ever tighter security measures illustrate authorities' efforts to keep passengers safe.

"The answers aren't that easy," Butterworth said. "The old psychobabble — you just reassure them everything's OK and nothing can happen — you can't say that exactly. We have to be careful about making things sound so good that, if something happens, the kids feel betrayed by what their parents said."

"You don't want to tell your kids not to be afraid," Reznick adds. "You want to listen to them when it comes up. You want to be a container for their feelings. If you listen to them, they can move on."

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TIPS FOR PARENTS

Reznick offers the following tips for how parents can help their kids:

- Talk to your children and provide simple, accurate information to questions. Allow them to tell and draw their stories about what happened. Offer up your own feelings.
- Try to validate the underlying feelings in their words and actions.
- Reassure your child: "We are together," or, "We will take care of you."
- Be honest. Don't deny the seriousness of the situation.
- Respond to repeated questions. You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times.
- Hold your child, providing comfort. Touching is very important.
- Spend extra time with your child. When putting him/her to bed, talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if necessary.
- Provide play, art and journal-writing experiences to relieve tension.
- Plan something practical that your child can do to help (help clean up or make sandwiches for others who are working or hungry).
- Expect that resolving all of the feelings related to the disaster may take your child (and you) quite a while. It is normal for a child to bring up the crisis long after it has happened and when you least expect it.