

A MESSAGE TO PARENTS ABOUT HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH SNIPER FEAR

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The ongoing crisis of fear precipitated by the sniper and his recent message that “your children are not safe” challenges all of us in many ways, some of which we will not recognize for days, weeks or months to come. One of these is the way children cope.

We have learned important lessons from our previous experiences with children coping with traumatic disasters — wars (e.g., the Gulf War), natural catastrophes (e.g., earth quakes, floods, fires), school shootings (e.g., Columbine), and other terrorist acts (e.g., Oklahoma City, 9/11).

- ☆ Children in general will need reassurance that they and their loved ones are safe. Young children particularly will need words and actions to communicate calm and safety rather than anxiety and fear. The evidence is clear that children cope best when adults avoid being incapacitated by fear and anxiety. Trying to restore regular routines is important to reassure children that normal life will resume.
- ☆ Children already coping with loss and fear will need special reassurance. Who are these children? They are children who have parents away from home, who are involved in a divorce, who are hospitalized, who have lost a loved one recently, or who in some other way are specially worried about issues of safety, stability, and security. Everyone connected with these “at risk” children must make special efforts to offer physical, emotional, and intellectual nurturing and support.
- ☆ Children will need a chance to ask their questions and get factual information to dispel misperceptions and rumors that will arise due to their immature reasoning and knowledge. Adults should make themselves available to children to listen and then respond rather than just lecturing them on what adults think is important. Hear and see the world through the ears and eyes of children to know what to do to help them.
- ☆ Parents and other adults will naturally tend to become preoccupied, anxious, and sad by the crisis, but they must guard against this where children are concerned. If adults are “psychologically unavailable” children will suffer. This is a major issue. The message to parents is clear: **Don't become glued to the television and unavailable to your children when they need you most.**

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