

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

When Children Feel Insecure, Vulnerable

“**W**HAT’S AN EMERGENCY?” asks a four-year-old, quickly adding, “I saw an accident on the freeway and a fire truck was there.” As if that wasn’t impressive enough, the boy says, “I saw a fire too.” The “idea” of emergencies, viewed at a distance—blinking lights, huge trucks, sirens—sometimes provides excitement. Books on disasters and emergency rescues can draw in even the most reluctant reader. However, when children witness accidents and injuries close up, the emotional tone changes.

Recently one of our preschoolers slipped and fell off the climbing structure, then had to go to the hospital. After several days she came back with a cast on her arm. Her classmates reacted with equal amounts of sympathy for her and a sense of vulnerability about their own well-being. They made casts out of paper, and one girl told stories about going to the hospital. The children amped up their art work, busily creating drawings and cards they made for their friend.

As adults we can have a similar reaction to difficult situations. Have you ever experienced a wave of compassion mixed with insecurity on hearing of a friend’s divorce or serious illness? In addition to empathy, we tend to ask ourselves, “Will that happen to me? How would I cope?” In fact, both adults and children benefit from observing that others do handle painful situations, and seeing their resilience is one of the ways we learn to cope.

The little girl’s preschool teachers supported her and paid close attention to their other students’ feelings. They provided what wise preschool teacher “Mr. Bob” Royeton calls “a web of security,” becoming calm, reassuring listeners for all the children who needed to talk about injuries and medical visits.

The message the teachers conveyed through their loving responses was “You are safe; accidents don’t happen very often. Your friend was upset for a little while because her arm hurt, but she was very brave, and her bravery helped her. She will be fine.” Mr. Bob adds, “A cast can be a badge of honor that communicates ‘I went through something hard, and I’m okay.’”

Children’s feelings of security can unravel in response to many kinds of scary situations—TV programs, movies, witnessing a person or a pet get hurt or even die. The question for adults is always the same: “How can we tune into children’s perspectives and help them feel safe?” Here are some tips for restoring calm.

Pay attention to what absorbs them. When children keep talking about difficult themes, or start waking at night, they may be feeling vulnerable. Often they don’t know what’s causing their anxiety. Adults can help by thinking back to what the catalyst for fear might be and then talking about it in a reassuring way. Fearful reactions can occur weeks or even months after the fear occurred.

Point out examples of coping. Children are often upset when they hear of natural disasters like tornadoes or floods. “What if that happens here?” Explain that California doesn’t typically have tornadoes, but add that people are often very brave when hard things happen. Say, “I think you would be brave.”

Think good thoughts for the person. Whether you and your child are passing strangers in an auto accident or hear of a friend who’s very sick, talk about the value of sending good thoughts.

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