Kids need reassurance

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT
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I CAN’T watch the news anymore. I don’t want to engage with the horror of the latest mass shooting, terrorist attack, natural disaster, or world leader’s threats and decisions to put community, compassion and planet at risk.

The news affects many of us emotionally. We feel worry, fear and frustration when faced with disturbing news. How do we offer a cushioning of reassurance to our children when our own emotional states are experiencing upheaval? How do we support our children when technology is updating them constantly with the latest tweets, posts, updates and breaking news items? This kind of media exposure can induce symptoms of acute stress.

And every day we see our “leaders” behaving in ways, and talking in ways, that we have taught our children to recognise as unacceptable. How do we help our children make sense of these nonsensical, immature, egotistical “role models”?

I have recently read Jonathan Silin’s paper on Risking hope in a worried world. I have been reading his writing throughout my career as an early childhood educator. His writing is hopeful because he invites readers to consider the opportunities afforded by difficult moments in our lives. I like his writing because he believes that hope is at the heart of the educational endeavour and he believes in the importance of relationships and giving time to being with our children as they process their experiences.

Silin talks about the value of hearing witness, of being alongside each other in difficult times. Sometimes we get caught up in a frenzy to dismiss and distract, or fix and cure distress, forgetting that a touch, a hug, and a loving presence offers comfort and reassurance.

I have also just finished reading my colleague Shelley Dowell’s book Raising Stress-Proof Kids. Shelley outlines the long-term effects of stress on our children, and it isn’t pretty. Stressed children are disadvantaged children.

My take-home message from her book is the role I play in my children’s healthy development, and the importance of creating loving, nurturing and supportive environments. Despite what is happening in the wider world, I can give my children an advantage by providing a positive, emotionally supportive environment at home. And so can you.

We have to decide how we do this, and often it is dependent on the age of our children. My children are teenagers. Explaining what is going on helps them better understand situations and viewpoints. Having conversations means there is a space to talk through misunderstandings or misconceptions, and there is space to comfort and reassure.

Pretending everything is ‘okay’ isn’t the answer. I need to speak honestly and openly using my own life experiences and feelings. I have found that I can share my fears and hopes and not knowing with them. I also want them to know that I won’t minimise their fears or anxieties. Having opportunities and time to express their feelings is important for their social and emotional health.

Too often I have observed parents dismiss or underestimate children’s cognitive and emotional and empathic capabilities. Children understand human emotions. They are compassionate, loving and empathic from a very early age.

Home and family are important in these troubled times. Family is the place where we can maximise love, joy, trust and connection. And minimise fear, conflict and stress.

Family values are important, too. When we see ‘not-so-good’ examples out in the world, reminding our children of the values that guide how we as a family live helps centre them, and us.

We can point out opportuni
ties to be kind, to show compassion, inclusion and respect. And engage with others in kind, compassionate, inclusive and respectful ways. And we can remind our children that there are many good and clever people out there (and that they are good and clever people, too) and there are many good and kind things happening in the world.

We can also model ways of coping with stress and anxiety: turning off the news and social media, spending time in nature, practising deep breathing, sharing what we are grateful for, getting enough sleep, spending time being creative.

Family is a place to learn from what frightens us and a place to work together for a kinder, more caring, sustainable planet and world.

F.A.S.T.

How do you know if someone’s having a stroke? Think...

1. Check their FACE. Has their mouth drooped?
2. Can they lift both ARMS?
3. What if I don’t know what to do? Call 000 and tell them.
4. Is their SPEECH slurred? Do they understand you?
5. TIME is critical. If you see any of these signs, call 000.

For more info call 1800 787 653 or visit strokefoundation.com.au. Thanks to all our valued partners, including DRAFTFCB, Bacardi-Mittal and News Limited.