



Helping kids cope with bad news

The recent earthquake in Haiti, the tsunami a few years ago and Katrina a bit earlier were all tragic and momentous events. When catastrophes strike and are covered widely by the news media, the barrage of tragic and disturbing news can overwhelm many adults.

Imagine then how frightening and confusing it is for children to see these real-life reports of mass destruction, chaos and death. "Even very young children who don't appear to be paying attention absorb more than we realize," says Debbi Halela, a Youth Eastside Services counselor.

"Kids who see a traumatic event on television often have no sense how close or far away it is," Halela says. "They may have a lot of fears about whether it will affect their city, their street and their house." Halela recommends minimizing news exposure to pre-school and young school-age children because images can create unnecessary worries and fears. Sleep problems, headaches, stomach aches, excessive irritability and clinginess may be signs that a child is harboring too much stress.

Sometimes it's hard to tell if a child is scared about something. Toys and drawing materials can encourage very young children to show fears or feelings they may not be able to express in words.

Here are some other tips Halela has for helping kids when bad news shatters our lives:

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. Ask what they have seen and heard, what they know and if there's anything they're worried about. Then give them as much information as you feel they need to know without overdoing it.
- Use the news to share your family values. For instance, you might point out the importance of helping those who are unable to help themselves.
- With older children, use the news to discuss tough issues. Natural disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes, are ripe with questions about racial and economic disparity, for example.

The important thing to remember is that the best antidote to fear is honesty, security and love. Be sure to provide all three to your children anytime but especially when catastrophes such as the earthquake in Haiti strike.