

Talking to Children About Violence

By Ron Huxley, MFT

Violence in society is a major issue for families today. It's everywhere we look. Television and internet broadcasts of the Iraq war fill our children's minds with fear and confusion, school shootings do the same and even our entertainment is filled with violent acts. Part of the job of parenting is to protect our children from the ills, if not the evils of the world, but what do you do when it comes looking for you?

It would be easy to wait until our children bring up the issue and not take the lead in discussing violence with them. Unfortunately, too many children take in the information, attempt to process it with their limited experience and understanding, and never say a word to an adult. Just because they don't initiate, doesn't mean that parents shouldn't. For these children, talking about the violence may relieve feelings of anxiety and insecurity they were bottling up inside. Children get their sense of safety from the attitudes and behaviors of adults, primarily parents. How we act and talk will have a direct impact on the emotional well-being of children.

▣ Three Communication Steps

The first step in talking to a child about violence is to acknowledge his/her thoughts and feelings about the violence. The best way is the simplest: Ask the child what he/she thinks or feels. This will give parents a barometer about where the child is at and what concerns need to be addressed. Demonstrate that you are willing to hear it and give your child full attention without judgment. Too many parents are quick to jump into a child's comments and make them seem invalid. A parent might dismiss their child's fears as unnecessary: "You shouldn't feel that way" or "You don't need to worry about that." A parent might even reply that the child is being silly, stupid, or overreacting for what he/she is thinking and feeling. This is a sure method to get a child to shut down emotionally and not communicate with a parent, now and in the future. Get on a child's level by sitting or kneeling down when talking to him/her. And get rid of any distractions (i.e., turn off the television or radio). Make the conversation about the child.

The second step is to clarify and/or reflect back on a child's comments. For example, a parent might say, "Tell me more about your fears of someone killing you" or "What do you mean you think the world is going to end?" This also communicates to a child that what he/she has to say is important and not trivial. It makes parents more aware of the underlying issues. If a child's comments are clear, then repeat back to the child what you heard the child say. Don't be a parrot; just summarize it, so that you and the child are on the same ground mentally.

The third step is to share your feelings and values about the violence. This means you must be aware of what your feelings and values are before you ask your child to share. How do you feel about the violence? What is your value-system about killing, death, and violence? Is it a social, moral, or relational issue for you or does it encompass all three? Once you are aware of where you stand, you can communicate your beliefs with your child. Share in a direct, simple, and honest manner. How you say something may be more important than what you say. But be sure to say it in a matter-of-fact way

▣ What You Say Depends on the Age of the Child

What you say will vary depending on your values and the age of your child. Young children have difficulty separating reality from fantasy and it may be important to describe the difference. For example, a parent of a young child might state: "I know that the cartoons you watch sometimes have characters who shoot one another but that is not real. In real life, when someone is shot they will get hurt and may even die." Avoid in-depth explanations for younger children. They will lose attention and not be able to process long descriptions. One to two sentences are more than enough. Additionally, parents can use drawings and children's book about fighting,

violence, etc. Always follow-up with reassurances that you love them, will do your best to care for and protect them, and assure them that they are safe.

Older children may be able to verbalize their thoughts and feelings more distinctly but don't let that be an excuse not to talk to them. Use the same principles as with younger children but talk more deeply about the violence. Watch the news together or read the newspaper articles out loud, pausing to discuss thoughts and feelings. Ask if they know of anyone who has been the victim of violence. The older they are, the more likely they will know or have heard of someone. Talk about violence that has occurred towards them or in their daily lives such as school. Guide older children toward your values without forcing values on them or telling them how they should believe. Look at ways to get involved in your community or through national relief efforts to help victims of violence. Being proactive will give children a sense of power versus powerlessness.

What we say to children is important and we must say something. Sticking our heads in the sand will not improve the situation. Actually, ignoring or dismissing the topic of violence will increase a child's anxiety and fears. But more importantly, how we talk about violence will have a profound impact on our children's sense of self, their understanding of right from wrong, and their relationships with their parents.

About the Author

Ron Huxley is a licensed child and family therapist, author of the book "Love and Limits: Achieving a Balance in Parenting," and father of four. Get more info on Ron and request an online consult or media interview at <http://parentingtoolbox.com>