When the World is a Dangerous Place: Helping Children Deal With Violence in the News

by Diane E. Levin

The Realities of Working With Children in Today's World

Children are growing up in a world that is saturated with violent and scary world events. Despite adults' efforts to protect children from violence in the news, I have been hearing accounts from teachers and parents around the world of how news violence — about such topics as robberies, shootings, terrorism, and war — is entering young children's lives and affecting what they say and do.

News violence comes up when we do not expect it. For instance, just before the war against Iraq began, the mother of a 4½ year old told me that she flipped on television to watch the *Today Show* as she often did, just as it was airing a demonstration of the Unites States' newest, biggest-ever conventional bomb. The child, who had been happily playing, immediately glued his eyes to the explosion on the screen. As his mother quickly turned the television off, the child asked what it was. Feeling uncomfortable, she replied, "We're not going to watch that. It's for grown-ups."

Even when we think we have protected children, we often find out that they have been exposed anyway through the media, adults' conversations, and experiences with siblings and peers. The mother of a three year old told me that even though she tried to protect her daughter from accounts of September 11, soon afterwards her daughter's teacher told her that she noticed Louisa run under a tree when a plane went overhead. When asked, "Why did you run under the tree?" Louisa responded, "Because the bad men can make the plane crash into us!"

Some children end up bringing what they have heard into their play, art, and conversations in unique and unpredictable ways (Levin, 2003b & c). During the heightened media coverage of the US war with Iraq, a group of preschoolers made a building with large hollow blocks. They put sea creatures inside. One child held up a long, thin block and dropped it onto the animals saying, "It's a missile," then walked away.

Even events in the news to which grown-ups pay little attention can be raised at unexpected times as children try to deal with questions and concerns and make sense of what they heard. I was recently in a classroom with four to six year olds when a child spontaneously reported that he could not play with toy guns because ". . . a robber could sneak a real gun into a toy store and you could think is was a toy gun and use it to hurt someone." Another child said, "That really happened." And then another quickly jumped in asking, "Are there really robbers?" "What do you know about robbers?" I asked. As this confusing (to me) discussion about toy and real guns and robbers unfolded, I had the disturbing realization that at least some of the children had heard a brief local news report the night before about a robber with a toy gun who had been shot by police.

Changing Times, Changing Needs, Changing Responses

Before September 11, 2001, when asked about media violence and children, I most commonly heard questions about how to

Diane E. Levin, Ph.D., is a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts. For over 25 years she has studied how violence affects children and what we can do to promote non-violence in violent times. The second edition of her book, *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom*, has just been published. Diane would appreciate hearing from readers who have experiences with children on the issues discussed in this article. Contacted her directly at (617) 879-2167 or dlevin@wheelock.edu.

deal with violence in entertainment media and children's efforts to bring it into their war and superhero play. However, since September 11, while violence from entertainment media is still a concern and often gets mixed in with real world violence issues in children's play, I am hearing more and more accounts from teachers and parents like those described. Such accounts have led me to conclude that many young children are hearing about the dangerous and scary events in the world that can undermine their sense of safety and social and emotional well being. And, as they struggle to work out an understanding of what they hear, they need more help from adults than we usually give.

In all of the above situations, the adults were left with the imposing challenge of trying to figure out how to best respond to the children and wishing they did not have to. There are few foolproof formulae to follow and few of us have received much training to help us with such efforts. There is still a lot to learn about how best to help young children deal with violent world events, but we do know enough now to begin to outline guidelines for implementing an age-appropriate, meaningful, and caring approach (Greenman, 2001; Levin, 2003a).

What Teachers (and Parents) Can Do*

■ **Protect young children as much as possible from exposure to news violence on the television, radio, or from hearing adults talk about it.** While we can rarely protect them fully, having safety and security predominate in children's lives is vital for emotional health. The mother's instinct to turn off the television when she saw her child's response to the bomb explosion was appropriate. Especially at times when violent events are the focus of much news coverage, as it was after 9/11 and during the US war against Iraq, it is wise to turn on the television only at pre-planned times for pre-planned programs.

■ **Trusted adults have a vital role to play helping children sort out what they see and hear and in helping them feel safe.** When news violence does get through, despite our efforts to protect them, children often feel scared or confused. They need to know you are there to help them in an ongoing way and that they will not be criticized for bringing up the issue or saying what is really on their minds. How you react plays a big role in determining how they think and feel, and what they learn. The children who began talking about toy and real guns and robbers showed they felt safe raising the issue, and asking them what they knew about robbers conveyed that the adult was interested in their ideas.

■ **In deciding how to respond, take your lead from what the children do and say and what you know about them as individuals.** Base your responses on age, prior experiences, specific needs, and unique concerns of individual children, not on how you think and feel about the issue. Before jumping to any conclusions about the reasons why Louisa ran under a tree when a plane flew overhead, the teacher asked an open-ended question, "Why did you run under the tree?" to check out her suspicion about what was going on. Once she heard Louisa's answer, she had a clearer idea about how to respond.

■ **Remember that young children won't understand violence as adults do.** When they see or hear something scary, children often relate it to themselves and worry about their own safety. They tend to focus on one thing at a time and the most salient aspects of what they see. Because they do not have logical causal thinking, it's hard for them to figure out the logic of what happened and why, or sort out what is pretend and what is real. They relate what they hear to themselves, to what is important to them, as well as to what they already know. This can lead to misunderstandings. "Mommy works in a skyscraper; her building can blow up, too!" "Planes crash into buildings so they can crash into a building near me, too." "Robbers can carry toy guns that look real so toy guns I use could be real, too."

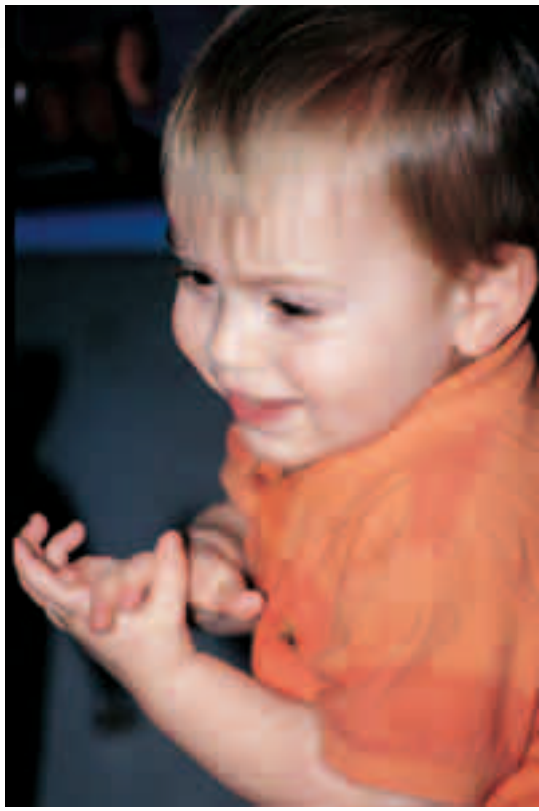
■ **Start by finding out what children know.** This can convey to children that you are interested in their ideas and give you more information about what they know and what kind of

response they might need. When the child asked if there were really robbers, the adult first asked, "What have you heard about robbers?" Once the mother turned off the television program showing exploding bombs, she might have followed up by saying, "It made a big noise and cloud of smoke. What do you think it was?" If the child says, "a bomb" the mother could respond with, "What do you know about bombs?" If a child does not raise an issue, but you want to, you can start a conversation with, "Have you heard anything about a plane crash [or bombs, or a place called Iraq]? What did you hear?"

Answer questions and clear up misconceptions that worry or confuse. You don't need to provide the full story. Just tell children what they seem to want to know. Don't worry about giving *right answers* or if children have ideas that do not agree with yours. You can help them learn to distinguish real from pretend violence. You can calmly voice your feelings and concerns, and reassure them about their safety. The children who talked about the robber with a toy gun were confused. They seemed to think children could get real guns that looked like toy guns. They needed to know that grown-ups make sure that real guns are not in toy stores and adults work very hard to keep real guns from children.

■ **Support children's efforts to use play, art, and writing to work out an understanding of scary things they see and hear.** It is normal for children to bring the violence they hear about to these activities. Although many teachers are uncomfortable when children bring violence into their play, such efforts can help them work out ideas and feelings; it shows you what they know and worry about (Levin, 2003 b). Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials — blocks, airplanes, emergency vehicles, miniature people, a doctor's kit, markers and paper — help children with this. Having materials such as these allowed the boy in the earlier story to drop the "missile" into the house and let the teacher know it was on his mind. A next step might be to ask the boy, "What have you heard about missiles?"

■ **Be on the lookout for signs of stress.** Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating from parents or sleeping, or troubles with transitions are all signs that additional support may be needed. Louisa's teacher recognized that something was probably amiss when she ran under the tree. In fact, when Louisa's mother heard the story, she realized this might explain why Louisa had recently begun having nightmares and running into her parents' bed. Protecting children from violent media images, maintaining routines, providing reassurance and extra hugs can help them regain equilibrium.



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■ **Help children learn alternatives to the harmful lessons they may be learning about violence and prejudice.** Some children are confused when we tell them to use their words with their own conflicts, but then they see grown ups using guns and bombs to solve theirs. While helping them deal with this apparent contradiction, it is more important now than ever to help them experience the power of solving their own conflicts without violence. In addition, when children hear about grown-ups fighting, they try to figure out who the good guys are and who is bad. Their way of thinking can contribute to stereotyped ideas about people, especially based on how they look. Point to positive experiences with people different from themselves. Try to complicate their thinking — that is give them a bit of meaningful information at a time that challenges their ideas — rather than telling the "right" way to think.

■ **Discuss what adults are doing to make the situation better and what children can do to help.** Whatever your point of view, children feel more secure when they see adults working in concrete ways to make the world safe and to take care of victims of violence — raising money or collecting supplies to donate, participating in events such as rallies. Helping children take small and meaningful action steps themselves can help them feel more in control. It can also help them focus on positive aspects of the world, not just its dangers. After one young child saw a rally with grown-ups holding signs, she asked to make a sign, too, which said,

"Don't fight. Use your words."

■ **Have regular conversations with other adults about what you are doing and what they can do.** Support each other's efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes sharing information that comes up with particular children, developing effective response strategies together, and agreeing to protect children from unnecessary exposure to violence. Talking together can also help you meet your own needs in dealing with the violence that surrounds us.

Foundations for Safety and Peace

This is a time of increasing pressure to focus our work with young children on basic academic skills, often at the expense of addressing pressing social and emotional needs such as helping them deal with the violence in the news. By making their efforts to deal with news violence a legitimate part of our work with children, we contribute to their overall mental heath and sense of safety — necessary conditions for effective learning to occur. We are also helping children learn alternatives to violence and build the foundation they need to live together in peace.

References

Greenman, J. (2001). *What Happened to the World? Helping Children Cope in a Turbulent World.* Watertown: MA: Bright Horizons. [Download from web: www.brighthorizons.com.]

Levin, D. E. (2003a). *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom (2nd Edition).* Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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Web Site Resources

National Association for the Education of Young Children. Resources on children, war, and violence. *www.naeyc.org/Supporting_Children.htm*

Public Broadcasting System. "Talking with kids about war and violence." *www.pbs.org/parents*.

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment. Downloadable guides for dealing with children and violence issues. *www.truceteachers.org*.

*Adapted from *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom (2nd Edition)* by Diane E. Levin.

One crucial source of my growing awareness that news violence is affecting children at a global level is the 2003 World Forum on Early Care and Education. Participants from around the world generously shared with me stories of how they have seen media violence affect children in their countries. Their accounts sound uncannily like the examples I use in this article which come from adults in the United States.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Changing . . . is hard: This article focuses on the dynamic nature of teaching young children — how things change as world conditions and situations change. It is very likely that teachers will need help figuring out how to implement Levin's suggestions. In a staff meeting, take each suggestion and discuss it with your faculty. How does it apply in your school? Is it a suggestion that has validity for your program and your children? Then, open the discussion to identify actual teaching strategies and techniques teachers might use when issues related to media violence come up.

Must have library additions: Add a copy of *Teaching Children in Violent Times* to your teacher library. Then, download Greenman's book *What Happened to the World? Helping Children Cope in Turbulent Times* from www.brighthorizons.com for more ideas, teaching strategies, and information about helping children cope with violence.

But, how: Levin concludes by challenging early childhood educators to make dealing with violence a legitimate part of our work with young children. Devote a staff meeting to a serious discussion of how teachers can do so individually and collectively. Make a plan and implement it.

"Play is the highest expression...

...of human development in childhood
for it alone is the free expression
of what is in a child's soul."

Friedrich Fröbel

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