

What Parents Can Do When the World Is Not OK:

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Over the past few days there have been a lot of questions about how to approach our children when speaking about Israel. Are they better off well-informed, is knowledge really powerful in this situation, given how gruesome it is?, or is it too traumatizing? Several outlets have held Webinars and released information about how to help parents navigate this minefield.

We are three psychologists in Ottawa who have come together to address some of these questions and concerns:

Tina Payne Bryson posits that to foster a secure attachment we need to ensure our children feel safe, seen, and secure. In keeping with this theme, we provide answers to many questions that fall into these three categories:

Safe:

As parents, we have two options when it comes to knowledge sharing: We need to be prepared to either **Set it up or Clean it Up:**

- When questioning if we should be addressing current events with our children, it's important to remember that we can either inform our children and control the initial narrative (set it up) or be prepared to clean it up when our children come to us with questions once they have heard it elsewhere
- When describing the events, it's important to reassure children of their safety in their own community by highlighting all the steps and protocols that have been taken to keep them safe.
- Kids know something is not right. They see our stress, the heavy weight we are carrying, the bloodshot eyes from our tears, ... and if they don't know now ... they will, and they will likely have profound questions about this moment in time – what it means for us as Jewish people, how this could even happen in this day and age? We need to be prepared to answer their questions, to acknowledge when we don't have the answers, and to ensure we don't make false promises. We also need to differentiate what is happening “there” from “here” and how “there” may impact what life looks like “here” – that could be in terms of increased safety measures, how our community and families decide to become involved to support Israel, etc.

- **NOW MORE THAN EVER, WE NEED TO LIMIT OUR CHILDREN'S AND TEEN'S ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA.** Remember, we can't unsee what is seen. Let us, as parents, be our children's source for information and not the internet.

Seen:

- Kids fare better when they feel they have agency. There are things they cannot control and things they can.
- Kids feel their own feelings. We don't get to control what they feel. What we can control is the space we give them to name their feelings and work through them (Name it to tame it - see below in the emotion-coaching section of this document for concrete strategies)
- When offering information, let your children set the tone and take the lead in telling you what they want to know and how much detail they are interested in getting. Answer their questions directly at a basic level, and ask if they want to know more – kids know their own limits and parents need to gauge and honor that
- Our goal is not to tell kids what to know, how to feel or what to do, our goal is to reassure them and provide them with the safety that we can give them in this difficult time.
- Remember – kids have a magical ability to see the world as a beautiful place, even in the darkest of moments. They have the amazing capacity to imagine and dream and hope for a better tomorrow, even when there is darkness today. We need to nurture that, even when we feel emptiness and despair.

Secure:

- In order to continue to provide a secure environment, we need to model how it's possible to get up for breakfast even when we are sad, that we can continue on with our day even as our hearts are elsewhere
- Remember, this is a moment of triage. The decisions we make now do not need to be the decisions we make later.

- We need to ensure we prioritize keeping the lines of communication open, we need to prioritize self-care, and we need to preserve our children's mental health.
- We need to preserve a sense of normalcy— keep up the routines, the regular meals, bedtimes, snuggles and cuddles, and assure our children that as Jews, we always come together in times of celebration and crisis. This is how we have gotten through atrocities in the past and this is how we will get through this in the present and into the future.
- Focus on how we can help our communities, friends, family members, and Israel

Information gathered from Truvie webinar:
<https://vimeo.com/873043020/00a8ecffb9>

Emotion Coaching Kids During Tragic Times (From Emotion-Focused Family Therapy www.mentalhealthfoundations.ca)

- Like us, children are feeling a myriad of emotions at this time. Unlike us, they have less life experience and a less developed brain to recognize, understand, and express their emotions. As parents, we need to guide them through this process. This requires that we work to regulate ourselves while we talk to them about their big feelings. Pause to take some deep breaths and remember that you have the capacity to do what is necessary to be present to your child's emotions, even in difficult time
- In addition to the sadness, fear, and anger that these events provoke, there may be other feelings kids are experiencing that need to be attended to. Some may not feel strongly connected to the experience and may feel guilty or out of step with others. Children may struggle with feeling guilty for living safer lives in the Diaspora and may not feel they have a "right" to the strong feelings they experience.
- It's most important to remember that kids can be having strong emotions without expressing them, and they need your help to process them. Think about using these 5 steps to talk to kids about feelings:
 1. Attend: Notice their body language, behavior changes, and imagine, based on how well you know them, what feelings are happening for them at this time

2. Label: Name the feelings they might be going through. Be specific. For example: “I can see how sad you are feeling about what is happening in Israel right now”, or “Wow, you are really angry today and I bet what’s going on in Israel is a big part of that”. Dan Siegel, a neuropsychologist specializing in emotion says that “You have to name it to tame it”. Labelling emotion helps kids make sense of what is going on inside of them.
3. Validate: This is the hardest and most important step. This is when we help kids know that their feeling makes sense for them and what they are going through. We are tempted as parents to acknowledge feelings and then show them the bright side: “I know you’re scared BUT it is going to be okay”. Before rushing to reassurance, deepen the emotion processing by offering BECAUSE statements. “Of course you are sad, because you care about Israel and feel connected to it and to our jewish community here, and because you see humans hurting other humans and it is so painful”. When we validate kids’ emotions, we are helping them feel a feeling from beginning to end. This means that the body, which experiences physiological changes during heightened emotion, returns to baseline. This promotes psychological and physical health.
4. Meet the need: depending on what your child is feeling, they may need a hug, a sense of safety to face their fears, the setting of boundaries, or reassurance. Once emotions are validated, move on to this step.
5. Problem solving: In most cases, emotion coaching your child is all that you need to do to help them in these tough moments. However, you may also find that problem solving and taking action is appropriate once you have attended to their feelings.

Other resources:

https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet_Helping_Kids_Cope_Media_Coverage_War_Traumatic_Events.pdf

Rabbi Jason Millor's infographic below:



TALKING TO CHILDREN & TEENS ABOUT ISRAEL

ASK OUR CHILDREN & TEENS WHAT THEY KNOW

It's important for adults to understand what our children know, don't know, or have misunderstood. Talk about the language and terminology being used. For older children, ask them about where their information comes from.



ASK WHAT THEY WANT TO KNOW

Before offering too much information for your child to grasp, find out what your child wants to know.

Look for the answers together.



TALK ABOUT FEELINGS

We are geographically separated from Israel but our emotional connection may be stronger than ever. Many of us have family and friends in Israel.

What are we feeling?



DISCUSS

Talk about their questions, problems they see, our biases, and other relevant topics. It's also important to discuss the biases of different sources and their effects on us.

Ask open-ended questions and be open and non-judgmental. It's okay to not know the answer--be honest and offer to learn together.

Watch or read the news together. We like timesofisrael.com for accurate information.



EMPHASIZE HOPE AND ACTION

It is helpful to remember that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians want to live in peace.

Give tzedakah (charity). Supporting families in need is important.

Donate to Friends of the IDF, World ORT or your local Jewish Federation



BE PRESENT, EVEN WHEN IT'S HARD

Research shows that when children have a reliable and trustworthy adult in their lives they are more resilient and are more likely to have stronger mental and physical health.

Remind your children who they can turn to if their feelings become overwhelming.



RESPONDING TO OTHERS

Give your children some language to use when they do not want to engage with others. "I don't feel comfortable talking about this" is a reasonable thing to say. We and our children do not have to have all the answers.

There is a lot of misinformation out there, and our children do not need to be responsible for educating their classmates (as tempting as it might be to try).



REMEMBER

Remember that each individual's own developmental path will have a great impact on how they process, experience and understand challenging topics.

Finally, let's not neglect ourselves. Our own need for support is real and we should actively seek it.

