



Parenting in Stressful Times

Part Two: How to be Your Child's "Best Bet"

The devastating forest fires that are affecting Fort McMurray, Alberta are every parent's nightmare, as are similar natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes. Our deepest instincts are to keep our children safe and provide a stable, caring environment for them. When our homes are threatened and destroyed, our foundation is gone. The overriding question in our minds is, "What is going to happen to us?"

As adults, it is our role and responsibility to worry about the future. And so the question is, "What can we do, in the face of a very obvious disaster, to help our children get through this with the fewest effects on their emotional well-being?"

And yes, there will be effects. This we must grieve, as we must grieve the loss of our homes and communities. And yet, there are things that parents can do to help their children.

The first is to keep in mind the old adage, "Home is where the heart is." Children feel safest when they are with those to whom they are attached. While we may miss our house and belongings, children need us more than they need their things. For many of them, these challenging times are bringing them closer to their parents than they have been for a while. And these close bonds are what are going to keep them safe and well.

Children, especially in situations like this, instinctively look to their parents to see if they need to worry. They know that what is happening is not good, but what they need to know is, "Will you still be there to take care of me?"

And so we need to give our children a message of hope, even when we do not feel very hopeful or very sure about what will happen. This can make us feel uncomfortable, as we usually try to be honest with our children. But without this reassurance our children will be at a loss. They need us to take the lead, otherwise they will take the burden on their shoulders.

When we say to our children, "We will get through this. We will be okay," this does not mean to say that all will be as it was before. Nor does it mean that we know how we will get through. And what happens next may not be at all what we had in mind for the future before this disaster struck.

And so we must act with more confidence than we feel on the inside. We need to believe that we are our child's "best bet" and that in our presence, they will be able to handle the changes that life is throwing at them and at us. This confidence is meant to reassure our children that we will be there to help them through and that we believe that it is possible to come out the other side. A demeanor of quiet confidence will do a lot to help our children stay calm.

Of course, being confident is not the whole answer. There are many, many emotions evoked by these challenging situations. There is so much that is changing, so much that is lost, and therefore so much that needs to be grieved. During these hard times, and for months afterwards, there will be the need for many tears.

Resilience is a word that is often mentioned in these circumstances. But where does true resilience come from? Dr. Gordon Neufeld, a renowned clinical psychologist, proposes that resilience is the result of the process of adaptation. And true adaptation is the process by which we are changed by that which we cannot change. What leads us to adaptation is tears. Tears are the sign that the emotional brain has come to terms with the fact that action will not produce change. Tears are a sign of "letting go." When we let go of what we hoped for, we can make room for what is to come.

When researchers looked into the conditions that allowed victims of 9/11 to recover, they noted that the ability to express sadness and pain was key. If your children are crying, this is a very good sign. Children can only cry when they feel safe in the arms of those who love them and if their hearts are soft.

We are sometimes afraid that if we allow tears to flow, that they will never stop. However, the brain is an amazing entity. Once emotion is allowed to flow through, it strives to find a balance. The tears will naturally come to an end (at least for a while), if they are given adequate space.

Once we accept that tears are necessary and needed, we have to tame yet another instinct, that of wanting to take away the pain. When our children (or spouse or friends) start to cry, as difficult as it may be, it is best to just hold them in that place. I usually suggest that the adult try not to speak, but just murmur comfortingly and rock the child. As children lean in to us, even though our heart is breaking, the message we are giving them is, "I am big enough to handle this. You can lean on me. It's okay to be sad."

To the parents and caregivers who are accompanying children in these difficult times, my heart goes out to you. Truly believe that you are your child's best bet so that they can depend on you and lean on you and grow in the safety of your arms and loving heart.

In Part II of this editorial I will explore some other reactions that children might have in these circumstances, especially if they are not yet able to cry and how parents can best manage in that situation.

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