

Responsible Media Coverage of Crisis Events Impacting Children and Youth

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Circumspection and care are critical for the responsible media coverage of the impact of tragic events (or their anniversary), such as school shootings, terrorism, or war on children and youth. Children are less able than adults to understand their emotional and psychological reactions to the current events. This is particularly true for children who are personally connected to or affected by a loss. While the media can play an important role in providing emergency response information and news about how people are coping, it can also cause real harm to children and vulnerable populations if its focus magnifies painful, disturbing details, people's loss and suffering, or the possibility of future or ongoing threats. Instead, interviews and media coverage should focus on the healing process that is taking place.

DANGERS OF INTRUSIVE OR EXCESSIVE COVERAGE

There are many dangers in emphasizing or repeatedly recounting details of a crisis, particularly in cases involving personal loss or suffering of children. Among them are:

- Intensive, detailed coverage of the event can raise children's anxiety levels. Troubled youth and those directly impacted by the event may internalize the information and be at renewed risk of severe trauma reactions, such as problems at home or school, extreme anger, aggression, depression, suicide, substance abuse, or the impulse to harm others.
- Forcing children or youth to comment on their loss or re-live their experience can cause serious psychological setbacks. Children are particularly vulnerable and may assume an enormous sense of guilt if they feel that they have said or done something inadequate during a media interview.
- Asking students to comment on a situation they do not fully understand can put them in a position where they feel compelled to make observations or statements that are not accurate or even personally held.
- Excessive or intrusive media coverage can impede the ability of individual students and the school community to move forward with the healing process. Inappropriate coverage of memorial activities can undermine the purpose or healing value of the activity.
- Focusing on the fear and trauma caused by an event perpetuates the misperception that children are not coping. In fact, in most cases, the opposite is true and emphasizing this image can unnecessarily raise children's threat perception.

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL, RESPONSIBLE COVERAGE

The following recommendations can help journalists prevent the potential unintended consequences of inappropriate media coverage of a crisis or anniversary of a crisis event.

To ensure useful, reasonable public information, journalists should:

- Avoid the impulse to titillate or speculate.
- Require extensive verification of facts through multiple official sources in order to prevent inaccurate, fabricated, or exaggerated information from being released.
- Protect the identity of victims until immediate family members can be notified through official channels.
- Stick to fully verified information that won't hamper recovery efforts.
- Respect the potentially still fragile state of individuals who were near or lost a loved-one in the attacks.
- Understand the range of potential reactions that can be caused by a traumatic event or the anniversary of an event.
- Know the school/district's plan for handling students' return to school, memorial activities, anniversary events, etc.
- Identify and provide information regarding where to access resources on coping with trauma and who to contact if someone is having difficulty.

To prevent harm when reporting about the event, journalists should establish policies and procedures that:

- Coordinate with school officials and relevant community authorities about how and where media people can have access to school events and/or students, staff and families.
- Respect the wishes of the school community for privacy and the protection of students' well-being.
- Require parental consent for youth interviews.
- Permit youth interviews to be conducted only when a parent or professional mental health professional is present.
- Remember that children with parents in the military or emergency services may feel at risk during times of war or high alert.
- Inform victims and their families of sensitive reports that are about to be made in advance of their release.

To prevent overreaction, journalists should:

- Avoid over dramatizing the impact of the event on children and youth. Report how they are coping factually.
- Report information only from identified official spokespeople.
- Maintain a balanced level of coverage rather than permitting focus on an event to over-saturate, desensitize, or create a pathological circus atmosphere.
- Emphasize the steps that schools and families have taken to move toward healing, as well as the ongoing school-based prevention and intervention programs that support children's coping skills.

- Seek out and consult legitimate experts skilled in providing crisis intervention services to students and knowledgeable on how schools function.

FURTHER INFORMATION

NASP has developed tips for teachers, parents, and adolescents to help cope with traumatic events. These are available on our website <http://www.nasponline.org/safety-and-crisis>. For additional information or interviews, contact NASP Director for Communications Kathy Cowan at 301-657-0270 ext. 226, or kcowan@naspweb.org.

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