Jan-Uwe Rogge

"I wonder if any children have survived as well?"

How children deal with death, mourning and dying on television news

Therapeutic work reveals how children deal with the frightening images of television reports. Parents and producers can support the anxiety management if they adopt the children's point of view and take the adolescents' situation from a developmental psychology perspective into consideration.

Juliane and SARS

Juliane, 10 years old, has read about a disease, a virus, for which there is no cure. Her parents had explained to her that this virus could not reach Europe. "But it might happen," Juliane insists. Talk about the disease and the illness went on for weeks.

"She kept on bringing it up," said the parents. "And then she had read about some symptoms or other which were meant to indicate the outbreak of the illness. It mentioned spots, some kind of brown spots on the skin." Her mother rolled her eyes. "She used to sit at her meals looking at her hands and fingers all the time. Awful! I flipped out. 'I've had enough, for heaven's sake!' I once screamed. 'You want me to die, don't you?' my daughter forced out in a tormented voice. I was really floored."
One day she came to the supper-table beaming with joy. "What's happened?" her mother asked.
"I'm not going to catch the virus," Juliane answered, only to add self-confidently, "And if I do catch it or you do, I have an address where there's a cure."
"And where did you get it from?"
"From the internet. I found someone there who makes it. And I've pinned up the telephone number on the board in the kitchen."

This is only an excerpt from the conversations I have conducted in the last 20 years with children in my counselling sessions on the subject of fears and how to treat them. They mostly resulted from questions from parents, educators and teachers which they put to me following disasters, accidents or wars. Most of the questions focussed on how to handle appropriately the children's feelings of uncertainty. The conversations took place in kindergartens, schools and in my practice. The children were, moreover, given an opportunity to reenact or to draw their impressions. In addition, educators and teachers reported their experiences with children following media reports of catastrophes and wars.
One outcome of the counselling conversations was: children are quite individual fear types. They handle (media) fear scenarios in completely different ways.
Fear usually arises, according to John Bowlby, in compound situations, e.g. darkness *and* sudden loud noises. This applies equally to fears brought about by media scenarios usually involving several senses (e.g. seeing and hearing). Compound situations may be: an unexpected sound in the dark, a feeling of insecurity while viewing and indefinable noises in the film, a new situation which suddenly crops up, a monster which makes strange noises, the pain of a loved one, etc.
There is a whole range of staged primeval fears (fear and terror in the dark, sounds, unfamiliar situations, etc.) to which children and adults react in a similar way. Yet there are subjects, actions, images and sound elements which affect children more than adults (for example, disasters, monsters, rediscovering one of one's own experiences, the mingling of fantasy and reality, close-up shots of animals) because children – as a result of perception and development – only gradually build up distancing techniques.
Emotional insecurities in children can be observed when loved and trusted persons are threatened, real victims are shown in news and informational programmes and fantasy suggests "that could happen to me and my parents, too". Fears may arise when children are unable to put dramatic elements (e. g. camera shots) into their proper place. Ben, who feels threatened by a giant ant, had not seen it in a horror film but in an animal film that had shown normal red ants in large close-up images.
The younger the children are, the more likely it is that they take fright at or are scared by what is visually external (monsters, ghosts, etc.), by trick and transformation effects they

cannot understand. The younger the children are, the more intensively they are gripped by sounds and music and they position the way they experience a film on the borderline between spontaneity and compulsion.
Older children, in most cases from the age of seven, react with shock and unease to pain, injuries and destruction, to realistic situations and social fears that are close to the child's everyday life and enable a fresh encounter with fears to occur that were hitherto perhaps suppressed or avoided. But sympathy and pity can also result in emotional insecurity.
It is generally right to say: the fears that are aroused in children by media scenarios depend not only on the intellectual but also and principally on the emotional development of the children. The younger the children are, the more strongly, the more direct they react. As distancing techniques are only rudimentarily developed, such rationalisations as "It's only a film!" hardly result in any consequences. That also applies to older children, when they rediscover themes in a film that are subjectively significant and emotionally charged. Prior knowledge and previous experience are essential conditions for the revival of fears.
It is decisive that a child possesses distancing techniques: be it the possibility to break off the television programme, to cover up its eyes and ears, an opportunity for other activities or the assurance of closeness and security by persons to whom it relates. Knowing about the artificiality of a scene ("It's only a film!") helps all the less, the more the child has been captivated or already overwhelmed. Insecurities resulting from real-life catastrophes or disasters mediated by the news or other informational programmes can also only be handled by means of rationalisation with great difficulty.
Media do something to children, just as children assign very different meaning to them. Thus even strong

Important factors for dealing with emotions on TV are the total mental situation of the child and the child's abilities to cope with fears

reactions to television programmes, which the parents consider, to the best of their knowledge and belief, to be "good", are frequently not predictable. And vice versa, parents are horrified when children find spooky dramaturgy "cool". For children there is no such thing as media products that are harmless, which means without consequences.
Sometimes the child overcomes its fears creatively, sometimes the playful encounter with fears abruptly turns into fright and terror, into reluctance and frustration. The diversity and unpredictability of children's fears which can accompany the use of the media should be taken by the parents as signs that a child gives, signs of emotional steps in development which the child is just going through, of momentary worries and difficulties or of an indication that viewing the film has revived experiences that have long since been overcome.
Even if it is not possible to predict precisely which kind of media dramaturgy can trigger and increase fears, some elements of form and content can be named which result in stress situations and frightening emotional conditions. Children show insecure emotional feelings and impulses when

- they have not developed any ability to deal with media scenarios and do not know what awaits them;
- films do not have a happy ending;
- they see scenes which are emotionally charged anyway;
- they see with their own eyes disasters, catastrophes and wars presented by the media;
- unprepared by the plot and subject of a programme they feel negative associations with their everyday life.

News and informational broadcasts dealing with catastrophes or problematic events affect and frighten children or make them feel unsure of themselves. They revive – consciously or unconsciously – fears of being separated or abandoned. This tells us nothing about the harmfulness or dangerousness of such broadcasts or about whether it is sensible to generally not allow children access to them. However, it has to be borne in mind that programmes are often encountered by chance or incidentally – and, by the way, children are also confronted with death and destruction through other media. Avoiding and suppressing fears help neither parents nor children. It seems to me more necessary than ever in the management and handling of fears of separation and destruction to support children and to trust them to get involved in the fears revived by the worlds of seeing and hearing using their mostly very concrete means.

Klaus and the earthquake

Klaus, 6 years old, has created indescribable chaos in his room. Many of his things are lying all over the place. He himself is cowering under his bed when his father enters the room.

Father: "Tell me, Klaus, what's going on here?"
Klaus: "There has been an earthquake here and I've survived."
Father: "Tell me, are you imagining things?"
Klaus: "No."
Father: "Clear all this up at once."
Klaus: "I'm frightened."
Father: "What are you frightened of?"
Klaus: "Of the earthquake. You can see that, can't you?"
Father: "There aren't any earthquakes where we live."
Klaus: "How come?"
His father gives longwinded explanations of why there cannot be earthquakes in their part of the world. Klaus listens attentively and shakes his head.

Klaus: "But it can happen, can't it."
Father: "No. They don't happen here. I've just explained that to you in detail."
Klaus: "But if there is one, will we all be dead then?"
Father: "Klaus, there are no earthquakes where we live. It's impossible, for heaven's sake!"
Klaus: "But it might happen that we are dead."
Father: "Oh, Klaus."
Klaus: "Will you rescue me if I'm injured?"
Father: "My god! Do you always have to listen when we talk together? You pick up everything when we do, and then you take it the wrong way."
His mother enters the room.
Mother: "What's going on here?"
Father: "I'll tell you in a minute. We have to be careful when we talk together and keep an eye on what he watches. In the newspaper as well. We can't leave it lying around. There are quite a few things he can't deal with."
Mother: "Klaus, clear all that up. I'll be back in half an hour."
Klaus: "Mum's frightened as well. When you're not there she always says she hopes nothing has happened. And then she worries."
The parents leave the room.

Klaus had seen pictures of an earthquake on the television news and had heard that many children had died. After the television report he was very distraught.
Klaus staged in his room what for him was incomprehensible about an earthquake. He created chaos in the true sense of the word to obtain an impression with his senses of the catastrophe. He expresses his fear so that he can come to terms with it. His parents misunderstand his symbolism and do not accept above all Klaus's dismay, his wish for closeness. The father's attempt to counter his son's feeling of uncertainty by means of explanations is bound to fail. He addresses Klaus in a way which at the moment does not get through to him. Klaus is principally concerned with tackling his fears of separation and destruction which the earthquake has aroused in him. To do this he needs trust and closeness. Scientific explanations about earthquakes may be necessary, but they are not helpful in this situation.

How the thrill turns to fear

Five-year-old Alex and his father are standing outside the ghost train at the fair. They are wondering whether they should go inside. After a long discussion the two of them decide to risk the trip. During the ride through the darkness Alex presses himself against his father and holds his hands in front of his face so that he can just see the ghosts. Or he tries to frighten them by shouting out loudly. Hardly is the trip over when Alex wants to do it all over again.
"Well," 7-year-old Nadja tells me, "I am frightened when Maya the Bee gets up to her tricks again. Like the other day with the hornets. She was locked in and they wanted to eat her up. But then she just managed to escape. But only just. If I didn't know that, I could never stand it."
Children do want to put themselves into frightening situations, to experience them, and when this happens in a safe framework, with rules and rituals they have created and chosen for themselves, feelings of insecurity remain bearable and manageable. Experiencing fear means a heightened physiological state of excitement and goes hand in hand with the hope of security and a good outcome: Alex comes out of the ghost train feeling stronger and Nadja knows that Maya can free herself from any situation.
It is possible to talk of the desire for fear, also called a thrill, if three basic prerequisites are simultaneously fulfilled:

1. The child exposes itself *voluntarily* to a dangerous, emotionally unnerving risk which, however, is based on a familiar and accustomed pattern. Here play and experiencing a film show similarities.
2. An *external, objective danger* exists: the monster in the ghost train, the tingling sensation on the roundabout, the black man in games of hide and seek or the beloved television hero who puts himself in harm's way. The child gets involved in the game or the programme and
3. *forgoes the security it is used to.* The knowledge that the end will be positive creates trust and provides an assurance that the child will not be forced into doing something someone else wants it to do.

If one of these prerequisites is missing fright and deep emotional uncertainty remain. If children involuntarily expose themselves to a film or there is no happy ending a strong emotional shock can build up.
The desire for fear can therefore only be endured by a child because it knows how the experience that accompanies it is going to turn out: it is completely involved, feels and joins in, it is aware of itself and its body. But it also knows that the peak of excitement is followed by a pleasantly experienced emotional decline. Children take a deep breath, laugh, romp, give expression to their nervous tension: "That was exciting!" – "That was close!" – "I could hardly stand it." What they subsequently relate and play are evidence of intensive feelings and make it clear how children now have to restore their inner balance. And they are proud to have successfully gone through such experiences.
Their desire for fear manifests itself in physical symptoms: their blood pressure rises, children flush, get damp hands, become unsure of themselves, cover up their ears and eyes, become tense or grow stiff, groan, begin to laugh out loud, scream, sit down in an upright position, make comments with relief, seek closeness and security or display the behaviour of small children by sucking, putting a finger in their mouth or biting their fingernails.

Thus for children the desire for fear is a balancing act, which they frequently perform with great aplomb, but which sometimes can end in an emotional crash. The child *may* come to terms with its fears creatively. But it can also become uncertain of itself. Then the play with fear abruptly turns into disappointment and destruction. A desire becomes a lack of desire, and a confrontation protected by play becomes a real conflict. This desire and fear are experienced separately. The child is back in its everyday life again. Some situations I am now describing may make clear the diversity and unpredictability of children's fear reactions. They may encourage one not to look for blame, but to support children in managing fear. For an educational attitude that wants to protect children from fear, weakens them, keeps them little, makes them immature and quite often dependent on their parents.

Svenja and the Swissair crash

Svenja, almost 6 years old, had heard about an aeroplane disaster. A Swissair plane had crashed off the coast of America. Svenja has to fly to New York with her mother, but now flatly refuses to do so, because she is afraid of crashing. Her mother tries to talk her out of her fears. Her main argument – that they will be flying with Lufthansa, and Lufthansa aeroplanes did not crash – stood no chance of being accepted by Svenja. She will not let herself be convinced by any argument, however rational. The more impatiently her mother tries to persuade Svenja, the more stubborn she becomes. She puts her hands over her ears and cries out: "I won't fly. I won't fly." Two days before their departure – the situation between Svenja and her mother is escalating – both of them come to a counselling session. Svenja is the first to ask whether I would fly on Lufthansa planes.

"Of course, almost every week," I reply.
"Do you think they can crash?" She looks at me seriously.
I shrug my shoulders:
"I hope not."
"But they could crash as well, couldn't they?" Puckering her brow, she looks at me closely.
"It can happen."
"You see," she says, turning to her mother. "You see." Then she grins at me.
"But it doesn't happen so quickly, does it?"
"That's just what I think," I say.
"Well, will you fly now?" her mother wants to know. Svenja shakes her head.
"What must mummy do so that you fly?" I ask her.
She considers my question.
"Now come on," her mother urges her.
"Let me think about it."
After a short pause Svenja gives her answer: "Mummy has to sit next to me and hold me all the time."
"I'll be sitting next to you anyway."
"The whole time?" Svenja looks up at her mother.
"But why then?" her mother asks.
"If we do crash then I'm not alone. And we'll fly to heaven together. Otherwise I'd be so lonely there."

Her answer sounds serious and comes quite naturally.
Both promise not to take their eyes off each other during the flight. Svenja boards the plane, is no more excited than usual at take-off, plays, eats and watches films.
After some hours Svenja suddenly asks: "Was it here?"
Her mother is thinking of something quite different. "What?" "You know, mummy. The accident."
While some passengers look dismayed, Svenja smiles. "So, mummy, hold me tight now." After some minutes Svenja frees herself from her mother's hold and continues leafing through her comic.
Through the support offered by her mother, Svenja was strong enough to endure the situation because she had found her own way. Adults certainly helped to do this. But they are not always available. Then children try to think up ways of coming to their own solutions, and these often contain a good deal of creativity and fantasy.

Preschool children are quite often affected and made to feel uncertain of themselves by news dealing with catastrophes or disasters

The broadcasts revive children's deep-seated fears. That does not mean they should generally not be allowed access to them. Moreover, they often encounter such news items by chance or in passing – and, by the way, children are confronted with death and destruction every day. Avoiding or suppressing fears help neither parents nor children. Fears of separation and death also have their function. They may indicate steps in development and maturity. The latter entail new tasks and demands – and thus fears as well that have to be coped with. There is no denying that children's fears also question taboos. Here it is especially important to support the children with the management of their fears, to give them confidence to use their mostly very clear visual means of getting involved in those fears which are aroused by the worlds of pictures and sounds. Parents can learn a lot from their children in the matter of anxiety management. And, vice-versa, parents can give their children the confidence to face their fears and manage them.

Frederick and the Estonia disaster

On 28th September 1994 Frederick, 7 years old, is sitting at the breakfast table, when the radio reports on the disaster of the Estonia ferry in the Baltic Sea. He looks up aghast: "I wonder if any children have survived," is his first question. His parents are rather annoyed and say nothing. "If they're old enough they can swim," Frederick answers his own question himself. After that he is quiet, asks as he leaves where Finland is and Estonia and whether "we have ever been there". He gives his mother a longer farewell kiss than usual.

When he comes home at midday he at once wants to hear more news. Then, according to his mother, he "bombards me with questions". Frederick wants to know exactly what happened: what the ferry looked like, why it sank so quickly and why the people could not rescue themselves. Frederick is greatly interested in technical details. His mother cannot give a satisfactory answer: on the one hand, she herself is completely shaken and, on the other, she does not have the necessary factual knowledge – why should she? But she remains patient, frequently asking her own questions, and these encourage her son to express his thoughts. What strikes her in particular is his ideas about how anyone could nevertheless survive such a disaster. He knows that in the summer they are taking a trip to Norway, and to do this they will have to use a ferry. Frederick's mother avoids mentioning that this would not happen to them because the ferries to Norway are safe.

Fredrick develops the idea of a watch working round the clock when other members of the family are sleeping on the ferry in the summer. One person would "have to keep watch all the time" and then if "something happens" he would "warn the others". His mother strokes his hair and Frederick seems satisfied.

In the afternoon he fetches his plastic toy boat, goes with it to the garden pond and copies – with endless repetitions – the sinking of the ship. In the evening he announces to his father that the Estonia did not stand a chance. Once a ship "is really listing it soon goes down". Playing with the sinking of the ship goes on for a considerable time. After hearing about the ferry disaster, Frederick sleeps restlessly at night, wakes up now and then, has nightmares and fear fantasies. In view of the exceptional situation, his father wants to allow him to stay in his parents' bedroom, although his son did not ask to do so. So his mother has another idea: "Let's start practising the watch for the trip in the summer," she explains to her son in the morning. Frederick smiles all over his face and wants to be the first to go on watch. They agree on keeping watch for one hour and then to switch over. When his mother wakes up in the night she finds Frederick in the hall with his head buried in a cushion, fast asleep. Fatigue has overcome him. When his mother carries him to bed he blinks. "Now it's your turn, mum." She puts him to bed, remains seated for a moment and he falls asleep at once.

The watch ritual is repeated in the nights to follow. Frederick goes on the first watch, falls asleep and is carried to his bed by his mother. His restless nights, his nightmares and fear fantasies quickly disappear. Together he and his mother have found a way of dealing with fears which have assumed concrete form as a result of a catastrophe. Both his game involving sinking and destruction and the way in which his emotional uncertainty is constructively overcome by the ritual he has developed show how empathic understanding can help the child to cope with crises. The way found by Frederick's mother does not protect him from the crisis, but instead gives him the strength to overcome it.

Children are being integrated into societal contexts at an increasingly early age

Children are confronted with information which quite often puts a strain on them and overtaxes them, leaving behind fears, a feeling of helplessness, resignation and powerlessness. Younger children, in particular, manage these fears by means of play. That is why it is important to give children space for this. From the nineties on, a noticeable increase in war games among adolescents could be noticed. This is due to an encounter by children at an early age with war events which they experience on the television screen and in the media. While the symbolic managing character of their play is clear to Central European children (they don't "really" die), children with real-life war experiences, for example from Bosnia or African zones of civil war, manage these serious experiences differently: children at play, when they are "shot dead", have to remain lying on the ground and are not allowed to stand up.

And all educators, for all their well-meant peace efforts, should take good note: children are not helped by educational efforts which are based on the level of development of adults. Children have a very precise feeling for tackling terrifying experiences both symbolically and in real life. Anyone wanting to do practical peace work with children must be prepared to learn from children and to put up with their uncivilised and sometimes drastically easy-going way of behaving. Children require accompaniment, but not know-alls, educational patronising, let alone educational aggression which works with prohibitions and depriving them of love. When children ask about war, the rule that applies is: ask back. Only in this way can you learn what children want to know.

"Dad, what are napalm bombs?" asks 6-year-old Tobias.
"What do you imagine them to be like?"
"They are something big, coloured, something sticky."

You can leave this answer as it stands if the child is satisfied with it. The time will come when this answer is no longer enough for it, then it asks other questions and demands more precise answers. It is essential to avoid a torrent of words. Answer briefly and take the child's emotional and developmental level into consideration. Give the child time to work out its questions. In this way you will prepare an emotional basis that will enable your child to ask comprehensive and complex questions later and to tolerate the answers. And do not forget: with questions about war,

children want to be sure that they are not alone in an emergency and can be certain of the closeness of adults.

"What will happen if the war comes to us?" asks 8-year-old Evelyn.
"It won't come," her father replies.
"But what will happen if it *does* come?" she insists.
"Then I'll be with you."
"Definitely?"
The father pulls his daughter close to him.
"Definitely?"
Her father nods, holding his daughter tightly.
"That's good. That's good."

Boys and girls – gender-specific actions and points of view: 11th September 2001

11th/12th September 2001. "There was a big fire. It looked as if the oven was burning. Like it was once at home. A whole lot of black smoke," said Patrick, just under 4 years old, when he saw the pictures of the burning World Trade Center on the front page of the newspaper.
"I wouldn't ever like to move into a high-rise building, aeroplanes could come flying into it. I'm glad my room's in the cellar," Florian, aged 5, relates.
"People say they flew into it on purpose. How can anyone be so stupid?" explains Benedikt, 7 years old. "They must be bad people, very bad people."
She isn't really afraid, says Sarah, 8 years old. "I'm just sad because so many people are dead. There were parents inside as well and they had children. And now the children are crying."
Katharina, 9 years old, reports that she has begun to keep a diary. "Talking to parents doesn't help me. Either they tell me that war will probably come, and then when I can't get to sleep in the evening, they tell me that I don't need to be afraid. They're really funny."
Children – no matter how old they are – are shocked by the events of the 11th September 2001. They react emotionally, seek explanations, want to comprehend the sheer incomprehensible somehow or other. And one means of doing this is playing.
13th September 2001, two days after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. A group of four boys – Nico, René, Björn and Roman, all about 4 years old – are building two high towers with blocks and are hurling plastic aeroplanes into the buildings with tremendous force. This game is repeated innumerable times. In between they jump up, run around, scream and romp. Then they build a castle in the sand box and knock it down by trampling all over it. Or they take a small cart, put two of the boys in it, while two others pull it along and play at being the fire brigade that has to put out a fire. The games are accompanied by plenty of noise. The boys show in their actions that they are ready to go into battle and make an attempt to face up to an incomprehensible challenge.
At the same time a group of three girls is sitting in the dolls' corner – Sabine, Mareike and Melanie, all 5 years old. They are dropping small cloth dolls from a great height, but catching them just before impact, they lay them down on a mattress and care for them as if the dolls were injured. This game, too, is noticeable for its endless repetition in constantly recurring sequences.

"My daddy," says Sabine, "is coming out of a big building like that one. He would only run downstairs, he wouldn't jump out of the window."
"Mine, too," comments Mareike, "he would have a parachute with him." She points to a doll which she drops: "Like this one. And then," she catches the doll with her other hand, "he lands very softly and doesn't hurt himself."
"And if he does," Melanie continues, "he would go into hospital, like this one here." She points to a doll lying on the mattress.
A little later the boys and girls are sitting in a circle of chairs together with other children of roughly the same age.
René: "How can anyone be so stupid as to fly into the building?"
Björn, looking at René: "That's what I think. I've got a computer game like that. I never fly into a tower. I always fly round it."
René, shaking his head: "They weren't stupid, they were bad, simply bad. My parents say they wanted to do that. They did it on purpose."
Björn, looking sceptical: "Perhaps they couldn't fly the planes? Perhaps. But I don't know the answer either."
Melanie intervenes: "What does it matter anyway? Whether they could do that or not. Lots of people died there. That was horrible. When I saw it on television I called to mummy." She stops to think. "But if the people in the tower had had a parachute they wouldn't have died."
Nico seems to be at the end of his tether: "Oh, such rubbish."
Melanie: "It's not rubbish at all."
Nico puts his tongue out at her: "Yes, it is rubbish. A parachute wouldn't open if you jumped from a high-rise building."
Melanie nods: "Oh, yes, it would open."
Roman has been listening all the time, then he says deliberately: "If you jumped out of it you would be unconscious right away, my father says. You don't notice anything any more."
Mareike nods her head: "And that's why they wouldn't hurt themselves when they land at the bottom."
Sabine has been listening quietly all the time, then she says with satisfaction: "Anyway, I'm glad we don't live in a high-rise building. Then I don't have to jump down."
René laughs: "Well, Batman could jump out of a tall building. That's something he could do."
Björn interrupts René's words: "Or Superman. Well, I'd like to be Superman. Then nothing can happen to me."
Sabine makes a thoughtful impression when she says: "If Superman jumps out of there he'd be sure to break a leg."

Frequently boys as well as girls are suddenly confronted with catastrophes, disasters, with war and terror. Such events are the main features of their conversations and manifest themselves in the boys' activities and

(re)play . Here gender-typical (but not -specific) accents can be discerned:

- The boys' aggressions are more strongly directed outwards, especially in replaying events and telling stories. Girls, on the other hand, show more dismay, they react with insecurity and fright. Girls are more sympathetic towards victims, put themselves in the position of those affected and are interested in the consequences of destructive acts.
- In the boys' games the physical aspects and force predominate. The replays of the girls seem to be calmer, quieter, more reserved. Girls work off not so much the physical as the psychological strain in their play.
- The feelings of uncertainty boys have are denied by excessive motor activity or rationalising remarks. That is meant to delude others into thinking they are indifferent, carefree, sovereign or competent.

Accompanying and supporting the children

It is paradoxical and contradictory: in wars and catastrophes educators and psychologists are in greater demand than ever – no matter whether the questions are posed by parents or journalists. In conclusion, I should now like to deal with questions most frequently asked in the last few years and my answers to them in the form of an interview.

How can I explain to my child the 11th September or the Iraq War?

This is a typical way for adults to approach the problem. Although they themselves are emotionally affected, they want to explain everything by reason. But children, the younger they are, are mainly emotionally concerned. Children are made to feel uncertain by the outbreak of a war. Background information, long-winded explanations and theoretical arguments do not help them. These as well as a sensible clarification of what a war is or how it was able to break out are more suitable for older schoolchildren and are aimed more at adolescents.

Should parents wait until their children approach them with their questions? Or do they have to take the initiative and make the first move?

Younger children are more receptive if the parents answer the questions that the children have asked of their own accord. But they sometimes need time before they ask them. A confidently inquisitive child will ask sooner, while one who is more introvert first tries to find answers for itself. The rule for parents is: make yourself available when children come to you with their questions and thirst for knowledge.

What should parents watch out for? What in your opinion is important?

Children want honest, they want frank answers, and they do not need calming down with such remarks as "You're still too young for that" or parents' answers which fail to respect the children's feelings: "There's no need to be afraid." Images such as those from the Iraq War induce fears of separation and give rise to feelings of being alone: "What will happen to me, if daddy and mummy get killed?" Schoolchildren more frequently establish connections to their own reality: "What will happen if something like that takes place in my town?" Or: "I'm afraid the war might come to us." Reports which older children read or see in the media leave them with feelings of helplessness, powerlessness and being at the mercy of events they cannot control.

What is important for children in this situation?

Children need the certainty and the feeling that they are being taken seriously. They need support, warmth and security. They need as much normality as necessary.

To cancel children's birthdays or parties by referring to the war contributes to further insecurity. Should the child now sleep badly, have nightmares and want to come into the parents' bed to find closeness there, that is quite all right for a limited time.

One keeps hearing about parents now having to talk to their children. What do they have to pay attention to?

Answers appropriate to their age are important. In the case of younger children, the principle of asking back is especially suitable. "Can that happen where we live, dad?" – "What do you think?" – "I think it can, dad. But if something happens you will be with me." The father nods and picks up his son. From this brief dialogue you can see that the child is not concerned about whether war can come, but about the consequences arising from it. The child wants to be certain that it can then rely on the parents' support.

You talk about answers and forms of anxiety management that are appropriate to the child's age. What is meant by that?

Younger children manage fears in their games, in their dreams, while older children seek a discussion with their parents, but also and above all conversations with their peers. They do not just talk, however, they also do something: they set up candles, they demonstrate, they lay down flowers, they write letters and diaries. Such activities are attempts to deal with feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

But adults also have fears. Should parents hide them?

Parents are not omniscient beings, free of fear. That is something children will not buy from their parents. The rule for parents: be honest, admit

uncertainties. And if you cannot explain something, then tell the child. Sentences like "You're far too young for things like that" are not taken seriously by children's personalities with their urge to understand reality.

Can children now see news programmes?

A child does not learn news about the situation in the world through television programmes alone. All the media are full of news. Reports about catastrophes induce fears of separation, feelings of being abandoned. Two things are important in the case of younger children: with news programmes made for adults it is important to set clear limits. But if children should be confronted with them anyway, they have to be given an opportunity to cope with what they have seen.
They do this through play or, when they are older, through talking.
Added to this is a second viewpoint: there are news broadcasts for adolescents such as *logo!*[1], which do an excellent job of editing such dramatic events for children from the age of 8.

When do children return to their normal everyday life again?

This does not come about so quickly and without complications. In the case of the first Gulf War it could be observed how elements of the war were still present in the children's games and dreams, in their drawings and conversations even after many weeks and months.

Children need time to manage their fears and uncertainties. And we should also give them this time. Support, security, normality are important. And in the end it is also important to pass on to the children a tolerant attitude to life and to instil in them respect and a high regard for different cultures. The reaction of many children to the events of the 11th September 2001 is encouraging: children – irrespective of the culture and religion they belong to – mourned. Adults could learn from children what it means to treat one another with respect and dignity.

What can producers and news writers do in order not to make children uncertain of themselves?

Since the first Gulf War at the beginning of the nineties it has been possible to observe a change in the way the media report on catastrophes and wars. With close-up shots the victims are displayed in the truest sense of the word. Such images, which quite often centre on crying children and disconcerted mothers, shock not only the adolescent viewers. Reporting lacks any compassionate distance from what has happened. It is simple to focus the camera on the victim, but it is incomparably more difficult to report on wars and catastrophes in pictures and sound subtly and based on solidarity. How this can be done in a way that is appropriate and understandable for children is shown anew week after week by the children's news broadcast *logo!* in its standard and special programmes. ■

Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell

NOTE

[1] *A special news programme for children by ZDF German Television (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) which is broadcast on the German children's channel KI.KA.*

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