

Living With Fear

When children see frightened faces, sense of security is lost

*By Diane Majeske
News-Leader*

As devastation was wreaked upon America on Tuesday, we watched in horror.

We turned on the television, listened to the radio, read the paper.

We were upset, terrified, unbelieving. How could this happen, could it happen here, would it happen again?

Our children saw the fear on our faces.

And their worlds were rocked.

“Children look to adults for some type of security,” said Karen Scott, coordinator of counseling for Springfield Public Schools. “When they sense that adults don’t feel safe, that’s very frightening to them.”

The accounts of the tragedy are riveting, she said, and adults may be tempted to stay tuned. But exposing children unnecessarily to the horrific scenes can be very disturbing and should be avoided.

“It is very upsetting for children, very traumatic,” said Scott. “We learned from Columbine that children were traumatized — even though they were not involved — just by watching the events on television. The repeated exposure is what’s harmful ... It was like they were secondary victims.”

Children need structure in their lives, and they’re sensitive to interruptions in routines, she said. So if children do have questions or fears about Tuesday’s upheaval, they should be immediately addressed.

“You need to tell them that bad things happen in the world, but that we’ll do everything we can in this family to be safe,” she said. “Adults have coping skills — we can say ‘It’s awful, but we have to move on.’ Children don’t have the life experience to interpret it, they don’t have the emotional maturity that allows them to process it. We have to model for them.”

And if children — or adults, even — have experienced tragedy in their own lives, Tuesday’s events could bring back terrifying, sorrowful memories.

“Any time a child has suffered a loss, seeing someone else’s loss reignites those feelings,” Scott said Tuesday. “That’s true for adults, also. Anyone who’s experienced a loss is repeating it today.”

That was one reason Lost & Found decided to hold its regularly scheduled meeting Tuesday night.

Lost & Found is a nonprofit group that offers support to children and families coping with the death of a sibling or parent.

“Of course, the first reaction is to cancel all meetings (Tuesday), because it’s not business as usual,” said chairman Shawn Askinosie. “But our reaction is we should not close Lost & Found, because it is business as usual — and the business is grief and healing.”

Tuesday night, he anticipated, children would want more than ever to voice their feelings and concerns.

“This is especially a time when kids will want to ask questions, and they’ll want to talk with each other and say things they might not be comfortable talking with family and friends about.

“This is just like any other night at Lost & Found; we just expect it to be more profound.”