

# HELPING CHILDREN GROW AND THRIVE



**Bright Horizons.**

Early Education & Preschool

Families, caregivers, and other adults who work with children are faced with many difficult issues. Crises can bring out the best and worst in each of us. The worst: selfishness and simplistic answers, blaming, avoidance, bias, or proceeding as if nothing has changed. The best: thoughtfulness, caring, kindness, courage, and the opportunity to guide children to important learning. Children learn from how people and communities respond in times of crisis.

## ADULTS NEED TO MODEL AND TEACH THE FOLLOWING

**Thoughtfulness:** We need to make an effort to understand what others think and develop a broader perspective that respects the natural world and its relationship to people around the planet.

**Caring:** We are not alone. We live in a world of communities of children and families. Our interdependent future depends on mutual caring.

**Kindness:** Human beings here and around the world are hurting, and we can all take action to help in some way.

**Courage:** It takes courage to confront the power of nature, the potential for violence or trauma, and to accept differences. It takes courage to help others in their confusion, fear, loss, or grief while we tend to our own.

**Learning:** It will help others and us if we keep learning more about the world of nature, the wider world of people and culture, and the close-up world we inhabit.

**Responsibility:** It is our planet, our society, and our community. We need to take care of the world that we live in today and our children will inherit. Create opportunities for cooperation, such as projects, chores, and decision-making. Help children construct their own solutions to disagreements.

## PROVIDE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ Help children take action, and take action with them: Write letters, send pictures, raise money, and connect with others. Take humanitarian action: International and national relief efforts always need support. Encourage empathy by allowing the safe and respectful discussion of feelings of hurt, fear, loss, and doubt (never forcing participation). Become language sensitive and teach children to be alert to hurtful

language. Value and respect individual children, and try to eliminate stressful situations when necessary (new transitions, unnecessary challenges).

- ▶ Expand children’s knowledge of the natural world through projects and experiments that involve growing things or measuring and tracking rain, snow, the speed of wind, or temperature.
- ▶ Provide pictures, music, films, food, art, excursions, and visitors to learn more about nature.
- ▶ Provide books at the appropriate developmental level that address the issues of natural disasters, poverty, respect for others, conflict, and overcoming fear and adversity.
- ▶ Teach children the difference between fact and opinion and how to discern from sources of information.

**Treat families as partners.** Keep them informed and involve them in your efforts. While parents should use children’s questions and statements as “teachable moments” to impart their moral and religious thinking and values about basic issues, caregivers should help children with anxiety, confusion, or interest without expressing their own religious or political views.

## **HELP CHILDREN COPE AND SUCCEED**

- ▶ Value and respect individual children, and try to eliminate stressful situations when necessary (new transitions, unnecessary challenges).

**Use conflict to learn.** Take advantage of disagreements to learn about conflict resolution, acceptance, and self-control. Provide materials that encourage children’s play and expression representing their feelings and thoughts. Children need to work through issues; allow fantasy play or art as long as it does not hurt others.

## **GROW GOOD PEOPLE**

- ▶ Sustain or create a democratic group in the classroom with participatory decision-making. Make the group safe for discussion of conflicting ideas.
- ▶ Create opportunities for cooperation: projects, chores, and decision-making.

- ▶ Prioritize character and empathy development and environmental learning and stewardship.
- ▶ Celebrate all the beauty of diversity. Research and respect differences in identity, culture, economic differences, and beliefs.
- ▶ Notice incidents of poverty, unfairness, and injustice in daily life and the news, and call children's attention to them as appropriate.
- ▶ Encourage empathy by promoting the safe and respectful discussion of feelings of hurt, fear, loss, and doubt (without forcing participation). Become sensitive to hurtful language and teach children to be alert to it.
- ▶ Try to find hope, goodness, and courage in every tragedy. Help children see caring, courage, tolerance, and compassion in them.

## **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE**

Trauma-informed care has become a frequently used phrase, but many aren't clear on its meaning. Simply stated, it means that the care a child is receiving is informed or influenced by an understanding of trauma and its impact on development and behavior. This leads to increased sensitivity and individualization.

While families can recognize the signs of trauma and the need for trauma-informed care, it is important to seek support and professional help when you suspect a child needs this type of care. The entire family deserves support and healing. Caregivers can be an integral part of the community of caring that a child deserves. Seeking additional expertise in trauma-informed care is valuable for all who work with children.

## **STRENGTHENING CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD**

All but the youngest children are aware that we live in a big world with many countries and many different kinds of people. The world beyond our borders becomes more real to us during international conflict. Interest in a crisis presents an opportunity to help children learn about the world and all its people and to connect with them. Use books, play materials, and the media to explore the world's peoples and environments, but do so in authentic, accurate, and culturally sensitive ways.

## PROMOTING TOLERANCE AND RESPECT FOR OTHERS

Children will mirror what adults say and do, which gives us the opportunity to promote inclusion. If children express fear or antagonism toward a group of people, ask them to explain what they are thinking and feeling, and offer alternative, correct information. At the child's developmental level, talk about how all people, regardless of their skin color or religion or where they live, are people just like we are. For older children, explore information together about how the United States and the world is made up of people from varying cultures, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations, and religions.

Tolerance and respect for other cultures begin at home, but school and education are crucial to create a more understanding and tolerant world. Together, educators and families can prevent dehumanization, prejudice, and stereotyping.

- ▶ Become aware of your own biases and watch what you say about others. Be a model for respect for diversity.
- ▶ Create a multicultural environment in your home or school, and show that you value diversity. Expose children to other cultures and social groups through books, media, restaurants, festivals, and personal experiences with friends, coworkers, and the community.
- ▶ Use accurate and fair contemporary images of cultural groups rather than stereotypes. For example, show African Americans and Latinos who are neither poor nor famous athletes, musicians, or celebrities. Show females in roles of power and men as caregivers.
- ▶ Listen to and answer children's questions about others with respect and accuracy.
- ▶ Counter stereotypes or biased language, especially when it is based on identity: gender, race, ethnicity, religion, size, age, or physical characteristics.
- ▶ Provide experiences and discussions that explore similarities between people and center on positive dimensions of differences and appreciation of them among people and cultures. Help children learn the difference between feeling proud of one's heritage and feeling superior to others.
- ▶ Teach children (and adults) to recognize stereotypes, caricatures, and unconscious bias. Teach children how to challenge bias about themselves and others in non-confrontational ways.

- ▶ Help children develop their understanding of fairness and justice, as well as identify injustice. Encourage children to take action to make their community a better and fairer place.

Ultimately, respect and tolerance require real relationships with real people. We must make an effort to bring children and families from different cultures together to truly come to know each other.

Adapted from “Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do” (Sparks et al., NAEYC: Washington, D.C.).

## **STRENGTHEN CHILDREN’S UNDERSTANDING AND CONNECTION TO THE NATURAL WORLD**

Our planet is a wonderful place for life. The natural world — the Earth, sun, wind, water, and fire — all work together to make it possible for us to live. But nature is far more powerful than human beings and there are times that natural events create terrible conditions for people. Understanding and respecting the planet and all its forces of nature is important for safe living.

All but the very youngest children can learn that nature is a powerful force in shaping and sustaining life on the planet. Children need to understand that all the powers and properties of nature are interrelated. Human beings are just one part of it. There is a purpose for natural phenomena, and even the most negative events can have positive effects: Floods distribute soil to farmland, for example, and wildfires help create new forest growth.

Here are some ways to help children learn to respect the natural world and feel their relationship to the Earth:

- ▶ Expose children to the outdoor world of streams, rivers, lakes, the ocean, stormy weather, hills, and mountains so that they develop a sense of familiarity and safety in the presence of natural forces.
- ▶ Involve children in gardening to help them understand natural cycles.
- ▶ Use books, the media, and the Internet to explore the world of nature and environmental issues as well as learn about catastrophic events. Learn how floods,

wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural phenomena have a purpose in maintaining the health of the planet.

- ▶ As a family, become more aware and active around environmental issues and become activists in promoting policies that respect nature and reduce the likelihood of damage to the environment and destruction to human society.

## **FINDING THE STRENGTH AND GOODNESS IN CHILDREN**

Disasters and crises are not only about needs. Although catastrophes may expose our frailties and vulnerabilities, they also can uncover our strengths, courage, and goodness. That is true for children as well. Author Robert Coles, in “Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear” (Atlantic/Little Brown, 1964, p. 329), observed more than 50 years ago that a middle-class parent was more interested in what was good for his children than what good he might ask of them. Coles was struck by the contrast with the “goodness” and moral courage that he saw in action as 6-year-old Ruby Bridges almost single-handedly integrated the schools of New Orleans, and other young black children all over the South joined the front lines of the American civil rights movement, facing angry mobs, water hoses, and police dogs. His observation applies today: Many of us as parents spend more time trying to provide the goods and the good life for our children than finding the goodness in our children.

Even young children are capable of courage, compassion, and contributions to the community if we involve them in the life outside the home. Even the youngest can be part of a disaster relief effort. Recognizing and honoring their individual and developmental capacity and competence not only helps children cope, but it is the essence of raising children to be contributing members of the society that they will inherit.

## **WHAT HAPPENS NOW? TOWARD A BETTER WORLD**

In times of crisis, it is important to find strength and reassurance in our communities, our diversity, and our common commitment to learning how to develop a better world. Horrific natural disasters that create large-scale destruction can bring into focus that we are one planet — a planet that our children will inherit. How we live our lives, the resources we consume, and the policies our governments pursue all have an effect on the natural world. Children need to be taught about nature and the Earth; the natural

forces that can affect our own lives and the lives of children and adults around the globe. Children need to develop empathy and a thoughtfulness that underlie their judgment. They need to learn how to work together to solve problems and draw upon the strengths of their family, their community, the nation, and the world.

A catastrophe or crisis that spurs us to respond with compassion and support can also remind us that pain and suffering, grief, or loss are not confined to world-shattering events. Every day, children around the world need our compassion and support for tragedies and struggles both large and small.

Children are always surrounded by heroes. In addition to the firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, armed forces, and all those who helped the victims or survived the devastation, there are others:

- ▶ Parents, family members, caregivers, and other adults who give children their strength when they themselves are overwhelmed with their own feelings of uncertainty, fear, or grief.
- ▶ Children who help protect themselves and their families, acting bravely as they flee or endure natural disasters.
- ▶ Children and adults who recognize they can support others in crisis and provide time, energy, or material resources to help.

When the winds are howling, when the noise is deafening and the darkness grows, or when the ground shakes or opens up, children need all the shelter and light that we can bestow upon them. We need to always remember that children have the strength and goodness within them to make the world a better place in the future.