

Resilience

Q & A with Dr. Paula Rauch

Dr. Rauch: I'm Dr. Paula Rauch, and I'm the director of the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting at a Challenging Time program at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center.

Q : How do I even begin to talk to my daughter about an upsetting event?

Dr. Rauch: When upsetting events have happened either in the news or a crisis in the family, often parents have the feeling, "Where do I start? How do I have this conversation?" So first, I always recommend that parents talk to the other adults, the important adults in your child's life but also ones that you trust, to kind of get together and think about what are the words that you want to use. If you're talking about an illness, for example, it's important to use the real words. Use the word "cancer" or use the word "stroke." If you use "boo-boo" or other euphemisms, that's actually confusing for children. If it's an event that occurs in the world—a tornado, a hurricane, a war or a shooting—be careful about the emotional words that you use attached to those. Don't make it "the terrifying fire," "the horrific shooting," but rather, use the descriptor "the hurricane," "the tornado." Let your child bring emotional words to you if he or she does. If not, best as you can, keep it factual. That will make it easier for your child to express their feelings and also easier to talk about these difficult subjects.

Q : How much should I tell my son about what's happened, or should I even tell him at all?

Dr. Rauch: When there are upsetting events that happen around us, the urge as parents often is to try to protect our children. We have to be careful about when it's being protective and when we're excluding our children from important supportive conversations that they need. So if there's an event that's occurred in your family that really affects your child directly, you want to talk about it directly with your child, but if it's something upsetting that's in the news that is occurring in the community or in the world, turn off the television, turn off the computer, limit the radio. Don't expose your child to scary events that occur over and over and over again. Especially for young children, but really for people of all ages, seeing those troubling images over and over again makes it feel like it's happening over and over again, and when children are looking at the adults that

they trust and seeing distress again and again on those adults' faces, both the content and the reaction are giving the message to a child, "Be scared," and really, the message we want to give to children is: "It's safe here at home. It's safe here with the adults that care about you." It's a good time to cook together, read a book together, do a jigsaw puzzle. Nice, quiet activities and extra cuddling is the best formula at times like this.

Q : How can I tell what my daughter's worried about?

Dr. Rauch: It's very important that we keep in mind all the time, and especially with younger children, that what we think a child might be worried about is not necessarily what's on our child's mind, and how we think a child has understood upsetting news or a crisis in the family or other family challenges may not be at all how the child is understanding it. A good place to begin the conversation is to ask your child what he or she has noticed. We want to encourage children to ask their questions that will be the follow-on after asking them what they've noticed. It's never going to be one conversation. The best conversations occur multiple times over time.

**Q : What if my son doesn't want to talk about what's just happened?
Is that okay?**

Dr. Rauch: Now, parents know their children best and know, is your child usually a talker about things or often hard to engage in conversations. I'm more concerned when a child who talks often about lots of things really is difficult to engage about a topic that may be upsetting or scary. For many children who don't talk often, it's more complicated to get them to engage, so think about the places where your child is most likely to have conversations with you—is it at bedtime, is it in the bath, is it on a car ride—and prioritize those times so that you can engage your child in important conversation. You don't want your child to get their news by overhearing it, and you also don't want to feel that your child is worrying alone.

Q : How do I comfort my daughter when she can tell that I'm upset?

Dr. Rauch: You hear flight attendants say, "Put your own oxygen on first and then attend to the children." As adults, we always have to put our own oxygen on first. If you're feeling upset, who are the adults that you can go to that you can have those important conversations with while apart from your child, not

when they're in another room listening, but really separate from them. It is important to have the support that you need as a parent to help you deal with your own worries so that when you come back to your child, you feel emotionally refreshed, able to be calm and reassuring. If you can't get to that sense of safety and security, then you need to go to the professionals that support you. Go to your own physician, go to your own counselor and get the help that you need so that you can be the kind of calm influence on your child that you clearly want to be.

Q : What can I do to help my son feel safe again?

Dr. Rauch: After an upsetting event, the most important thing that you can do for your child is go back to regular schedules and routines. You can expect that for children with more anxious temperaments, it's going to take them longer to reestablish that sense of normalcy, and in fact, if you have an anxious child, you may want to, all the time, be a little bit more mindful of routines and schedules so that if there is a disruption, that your child can return quickly to those routines.

Q : What if my daughter's acting differently now? Should I be concerned?

Dr. Rauch: If you feel worried about your child, it's important that you do seek help, because your being worried is a worry itself. After an upsetting event, we expect children to be upset, to be worried, to take awhile to reestablish a sense of security in themselves and at home. Some of the things that you might think about are, is your child showing any of the behaviors that he or she had when they were a little bit younger? For example, if your child was toilet trained and was wetting again at night; or if they usually dress themselves, and then for a few days, they cried and whined and found it really hard to put on their own shoes or to pull a shirt on over his or her head; children who show a change in appetite; children whose sleeping is really disrupted. If your child's schedule and their behavior is a little bit different for one week, for two weeks, I wouldn't be so concerned. But if you're noticing that your child is behaving very differently or if those symptoms are getting worse instead of better as you're approaching the two-week mark, that's a time to get help.

Q : I know this won't be the last time my family faces challenges. How can I help my kid cope as things come up in the future?

Dr. Rauch: Your child is lucky that you care enough to be on this website learning about how to support your child through upsetting events that are occurring in the world around us. The final thought is I have confidence that your child can be resilient. Resilience doesn't mean that a child is unaffected by scary, frightening or upsetting news. What it means is that with the support of those caring adults around them, they're going to be able to stay on track and they're going to learn from those events and they're going to be happy and healthy going forward. And that comes from your having confidence that your child can learn through even difficult times and that your child can go on to live a happy and healthy life regardless of whether it's a challenge at home or the many challenges in our world.

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