

When
Your Kid
Is
Hurting

Helping Your Child
through the Tough Days

Dr. Kevin Leman



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2018 by Dr. Kevin Leman

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Leman, Kevin, author.

Title: When your kid is hurting : helping your child through the tough days / Dr. Kevin Leman.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018007096 | ISBN 9780800723064 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Parent and child—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child psychology. | Consolation.

Classification: LCC BV4529 .L46 2018 | DDC 248.8/45—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018007096>

ISBN 978-0-8007-3506-7 (ITPE)

To protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with the author, some details and names have been changed.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



For all those who have been hurt by life.

May the words of this book be used by those who love
you much more than you know to encourage you.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 11

Introduction: As the World Squirms 13

It's not your grandmama's world, and it's not yours either. Times have greatly changed.

1. "Out There" Issues 19

How you can respond practically to your child's fears about real-world problems.

2. When Hurt Hits Home 45

Issues don't truly become personal until they are personal.

3. The Three Basic Fears and Their Antidotes 97

Understand these and you can handle any difficult situation well.

4. Why Grief Serves a Purpose 107

What your kid's behavior means and why he responds differently than you.

- 5. Getting behind Your Child's Eyes 121**
Discover how your child views herself and how you can better connect with her.
- 6. What Parents Do Wrong and Right 129**
What kind of parent are you?
- 7. Playing the Game of Life Smart 153**
How to turn traumas into winning life moves.
- Ask Dr. Leman: Q&A 165**
Straightforward answers to key questions parents ask about dealing with difficult, real-life issues and their hurting kids.
- Top 10 Principles for Handling Life's Hurts Well 265**
- Notes 267**
- About Dr. Kevin Leman 269**
- Resources by Dr. Kevin Leman 271**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful thanks to:

My longtime Revell team.

My editor and friend Ramona Tucker, for understanding my passion for helping hurting kids and walking with me on that journey.

INTRODUCTION

As the World Squirms

It's not your grandmama's world, and it's not yours either. Times have greatly changed.

Your kids are growing up in a world very different from the one you grew up in.

But you don't need me to tell you that because you experience reminders of that truth every day. Today's world is fast-paced, tumultuous, competitive, and violent at times. Even if you're a young parent in your twenties, a lot has changed since you graduated from high school. Just think about the first computer and cell phone you owned. Then take a look at all the technological devices you own now and what they can do.

The intensity of that pace deeply affects your child, even on her good days. That's why bad days and difficult experiences can be particularly traumatic if your child doesn't have the tools to deal with such events.

Children today face multiple issues simultaneously. As much as you might try to cushion them, they are forced to grow up more swiftly as they are assaulted by information and events on all sides. I group those real-life issues into two categories—what is “out there” and what is “in here.” Here’s what I mean.

We live in a violent world, with shootings in schools and on city streets, racial violence, terrorism, and cyber-slandering. Your kids face those types of “out there” contemporary issues—the events every human is aware of because of the society we live in. Due to the bombardment of media, today’s children are more aware of those types of events than previous generations. With a few clicks of a mouse or swipes on a smartphone, they can be connected to the gravity and terror of those situations—without parental guidance or the tools to deal with what they see and hear.

The result? Either they are traumatized and approach life more fearfully, or they become anesthetized to the hurts of others and unable to grapple with their own. Neither option is good long-term.

Your kids also face “in here” issues—relational and personal issues that hit them between the eyes psychologically, emotionally, and physically. That includes parents splitting up, getting shuffled between houses, and having MIA dads or moms. You might be the aunt or grandparent they currently live with. Dealing with court issues and the legal system is a way of life they accept as normal.

When I was growing up, I only knew one kid whose parents were divorced. That kid felt he stuck out like a sore thumb among all the other two-parent families. Fast-forward to today, where many kids have last names that are different from their siblings or the parent they currently live with. Many parents have divorced or never married. Kids might be raised in a single-parent home or live with a guardian.

Children also deal with depression and the death of loved ones through cancer, accident, and suicide. They are betrayed by friends and encounter bullying and cyber-bullying. They are told

they are stupid, fat, or “the wrong color.” They can become the prey of sexual predators and power-hungry, need-to-be-in-control individuals.

Yes, we can and should teach our kids how to protect themselves. For example, we can teach them basic self-defense skills and about “stranger danger.” But what do you do if the real danger comes from within? Most physical, sexual, and verbal abuse happens within the family or extended family. And what if your child innocently releases details about herself, her location, and her habits on the internet and is targeted by vindictive peers or an online stalker?

How do you respond when your daughter’s friend commits suicide? A BFF gossips about her? She ends up pregnant? Your deployed spouse is killed in action and your son says he wants to die too?

How do you react when your son is devastated because he didn’t make the team and he won’t talk to you about it? When your daughter refuses to eat because someone called her “chunky”?

In such situations and many others, how can you keep your child’s heart and mind protected from long-term damage that could affect their self-worth and relationships in the future?

It’s critical that parents help kids find new ways to process information and feelings in a healthy manner. Such an approach isn’t merely about coping; it allows them to grow in their understanding of life and its realities. It will put them firmly on the path of becoming an adult who can give back to the world, rather than one who lashes out against others in retribution or retreats to live in a shell in fear.

When Your Kid Is Hurting will help you navigate these real-life “out there” and “in here” issues; understand your child’s world, experiences, and fears; and learn how your child grieves. You’ll discover how to walk through negative experiences with a healthy, balanced perspective that will hone your skills and your child’s

to handle not only these events but ones that may occur down the road.

Here are just a few of the topics we'll explore in this book:

- How can you know what your child is really thinking?
- How can you talk in a way he'll want to listen, even if he's seemingly shut you out?
- What's the best way to acknowledge her hurt? What should you say and not say? Do and not do?
- How can you address this particular event without making her feel further like a victim?
- How do you know if his behavior is normal or if professional help is needed?
- If a loved one is ill, how much should you tell your child? What if he can't handle it?
- What's the best way to support your child during a tough time?
- Where's that fine line between protecting and overprotecting your child?
- When should you step into a situation with peers, and when should you butt out?
- How can you turn this trauma into a teachable moment that will benefit him in the future?
- What's the best way to guide her through this negative experience? To help her get up again when she's been knocked down?

The first couple of chapters will walk you through an overview of the biggest “out there” and “in here” issues that today's kids and parents face. You'll learn practical ways to respond to your child's questions, hurts, and concerns.

Chapter 3 addresses the basic fears every child has and the antidotes within your control.

In chapter 4 we'll talk about why kids grieve differently and what their behavior means.

In chapter 5 you'll discover how your child views herself so you can connect on her level.

Chapter 6 reveals three distinctive types of parents and how their approaches affect their hurting kids, so you can identify and then adapt your own style if needed.

In chapter 7 you'll learn the best moves to turn your child's traumas into a game plan that will benefit her in the future when other tough situations arise (and they will—that's just life!).

No parent likes to see their child hurting. That's why I've provided a hefty "Ask Dr. Leman" section as your armchair companion. It includes the hottest questions parents ask me all the time and my time-tested answers. Even if the specific situations described aren't quite a match to yours, the principles and suggestions I give for the topic should be helpful to you.

If you don't find an answer that relates to your area of concern, feel free to shoot me your question on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DrKevinLeman), and I'd be honored to help you. If you're wondering about it, likely so are hundreds or thousands of other parents.

The game of life isn't always easy to master. If you're reading this book, it's likely your child is undergoing a surprise twist that neither of you expected. *When Your Kid Is Hurting* will show you how to walk through that negative event in ways that will shape your child into a resilient, positive, and competent person you're proud to call your son or daughter.

1

“Out There” Issues

.....
How you can respond practically to your child's fears about real-world problems.
.....

We live in a violent world. Tragic events that happen in our country and around the world confirm that bad things do happen . . . even to good people. Mass shootings, racial and gender discrimination, gang violence, terrorism, diseases like the Ebola virus, abuse, suicide attempts, and bullying are only a few of the sad realities in today's world.

When we as parents see these seemingly senseless events occur, our natural protectiveness makes us want to batten down the hatches and keep our kids close to our side 24/7. If we do that, we think, they'll be safe. However, such an action isn't humanly possible. (Plus, for a growing number of parents, violence occurs within their own home, which should be a safe zone.)

So how do we deal with these big issues “out there” that we have absolutely no control over, such as a random shooting?

Have you ever seen a little child who is scared of an imaginary monster under his bed? What does he usually do? He covers his eyes. *If I can't see it, he reasons, then it doesn't exist and it can't scare me.*

Some parents have an MA in denial. Those who use this approach hide their heads in the sand to deny that violent events can happen in their sphere. They persist in thinking, *We live in a small town. Nothing like that will happen here. Our kids are safe.* But then the unimaginable does happen, like the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and parents and children aren't equipped to deal with it.

Other parents play Mama Hen, drawing their chicks under their wings and not allowing them to cohabit with the chicks of other flocks. Problem is, those chicks can't stay under Mama's wings forever. What happens when they're on their own and they have to live in the larger world?

There's a better way. It starts with being informed and aware.

Today's Big Issues

There are numerous “out there” issues that negatively impact children as they grow up in today's society. In this section, I'll give you a bird's-eye overview of the biggest ones that parents say keep them up at night.

The Pervasive Influence of Media and Social Media

Television, movies, “real-life” dramas, and social media sensationalize violence, sex, destructive acts, and death, desensitizing viewers to what death truly is and how grief and loss really affect someone in the short term and long term.

This “Hollywood experience” sets up in young minds unrealistic expectations about what life should be like—a party 24/7,

with plenty of booze, sex, and a morning-after pill to solve any unwanted side effects. Even harmful, vicious, dangerous acts aren't serious. They can be undone by clicking a back arrow on a screen. There is no accountability or responsibility.

Why else would an 18-year-old, as reported in the news, drive under the influence while simultaneously livestreaming on Instagram, with her 14-year-old sister and her sister's friend in the car? When the car spun out of control, the 14-year-old sister was ejected from the car and killed. A viewer's captured footage shows the driver singing along to music, then panning the phone to capture the image of her sister's dead body by the side of the road. All she could think of to say was, "This is the last thing I wanted to happen."¹

.....
**To many kids, life
is like viewing a
movie. *It isn't real.***
.....

Yes, likely other issues were going on in that 18-year-old's life, but how do you explain a teenager unemotionally recording an image like that? The callousness of such an act is astounding and horrifying.

So is the fact that a group of teens filmed a disabled man drowning and did nothing to help him. As he disappeared under the water, one of the teens simply said, "Oh, he just died." The teens, between 14 and 16 years old, didn't even call 911 to report the drowning.²

Truth is, the bombardment of media and social media has served to further distance our kids from reality rather than make them more aware of and able to deal with it. To many kids, life is like viewing a movie. *It isn't real.*

For example, when actors die in a movie, they come back to life for the next movie. But that girl's sister won't. Nor will the man who drowned.

Also, the prevalence of intense emotion in social media anesthetizes children to pain. They expect violence and death in video games and movies. Without it, there's not enough action. After all, being successful is all about getting more views on YouTube

and more likes on Facebook. The overabundance and ease of accessing harsh images leads to bland, uncaring children who don't understand real-life pain or have the tools to cope with difficulties when bad things happen to them.

Most news reports also err on the side of sensationalism. They cover and hype everything bad, leading kids to believe that there's nothing good in the world anymore. Not as much news focuses on the inspirational acts of heroes—people you'd want your kids to emulate. A saturation of negative news can't help but produce negativity in the generations that consume it.

Children are also assaulted with unrealistic body images through magazines, movies, Instagram, Facebook, and tabloids about their favorite stars. What average teenage girl wouldn't feel inadequate stacked up to a Victoria's Secret lingerie model? And if what it takes to get a girl to like you and want to sleep with you is drinking the right kind of beer or vodka, what teenage boy would think twice about paying for a fake ID?

With the overemphasis on sex, today's kids are sexting more than ever before. They are also seeing many images that aren't age-appropriate. For example, your first grader, who loves kitty cats, is searching the internet for cute pictures. All of a sudden she sees a heading that makes her think she's about to view some of her best friend little creatures. She clicks on the heading and sees . . . well, not exactly what she expected. There's an image she doesn't quite know how to interpret, yet it's imprinted on her brain forever. If you don't believe me, ask a guy you know if he's ever seen any pornography. Ninety-nine out of 100 guys will say yes. Ask him if he can recall when the first time was. Chances are, he can tell you exactly. Once shocking images like that hit our brain, they are embedded in there forever.

That's why I urge parents to be careful about giving smartphones to young children and to be watchful of their internet access. Kids today might be more aware, but they still deserve a childhood.

What can you do about this new Goliath? Technology and media are here to stay. You're fighting an uphill, ridiculous battle if you try to disregard them. It's humanly impossible to escape such negative images yourself or to withhold them from your children. So how can you teach your kids to handle them in a positive manner, making discerning choices? How much should you control what influences your kids, and how much should you simply play the role of guide as they explore various aspects of media?

.....
**Kids today might
be more aware, but
they still deserve
a childhood.**
.....

So much of what your child views and the way she interprets that information has to do with what she experiences at home. The type of relationship she has with you can make all the difference. Is it open, caring, and nonjudgmental? If so, she'll be much more likely to share with you what she's viewing.

Mass Shootings on the Rise

Our nation is getting angrier. In 2012, 28 people died—20 of them grade-school children—in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. In mass shootings in 2013, 5 people were killed in Santa Monica, California, and another 12 in Washington, DC. In 2014, 3 were killed in Fort Hood, Texas, and another 6 in Isla Vista, California. In 2015 there were 5 mass shootings, with 40 people dead. In 2016, 50 people were killed at a nightclub. It was the deadliest mass shooting in US history. In April 2017, a man opened fire inside an elementary school in San Bernardino, California, killing 3 people, including an 8-year-old boy and himself.³

Schools, churches, shopping malls, clubs—places that were once considered safe—are facing shock waves of fallout after these types of events. Random shootings can happen anytime, anywhere, causing untold damage. Innocent children who are

simply walking down a street can be caught in the middle of gunfire.

Yes, your school can install protective devices. They can provide crisis training sessions for students, teachers, and administration with the local PD or SWAT. But no device or training can completely stop an angry person from wreaking revenge on an unsuspecting world because he's not happy with the way life is treating him.

The only real solution for hate and anger is a heart transplant for all parties. Unfortunately, that isn't likely to happen anytime soon. But there's something you *can* do—role-model to your child positive ways to process and handle anger.

No parent expects their child to be the one on the evening news.

When the Unexpected Happens

In late 2014, 16 South Korean music fans died when they fell more than 65 feet at an outdoor K-pop concert due to the collapse of a ventilation grate.⁴ Not one of those fans would have imagined that event would be their final farewell. But does that mean you should refuse to allow your 15-year-old son to accompany his friend and her parents to a concert he looks forward to in Los Angeles, just because something could happen at that big venue?

Life isn't safe. Accidents happen. A father of five is rear-ended on his way home from work, and his SUV is pushed into an oncoming truck on the expressway. A woman falls out of a golf cart and injures her brain. A bus full of children returning from a field trip overturns. None of these events are expected, yet they happen.

How you respond to such events tells your child everything about your life perspective and also shapes their worldview. Do they see from you an acceptance of those realities yet the drive to move on even when tragedies happen? Or do you sink into fear and what-ifs, controlled by negativity and paralyzed by the possibilities?

Personal Safety and Sexual Violence

Today's rape culture is, by its very design, the enemy of both men and women. That's why a dad I know insisted his 18-year-old daughter take a self-defense class before leaving for an urban college. He wanted her to learn as many techniques as possible to ensure her safety.

Gender violence (molestation, sexual assault, date rape, rape) doesn't have sex at its base as much as power and domination over someone. No one "asks for it." The act is a crime.

According to the Joyful Heart Foundation, "In the United States, one in three women and one in six men are survivors of sexual violence."⁵ The crime affects people of all ages, sexual orientations, religions, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and education levels. That means neither your daughter nor your son is immune to becoming the target of such a criminal. So it's critically important you teach your children:

- To walk with purpose and confidence in public places. Sexual offenders are less likely to pick on competent-appearing children, because they are unable to dominate them as easily. At their core, sexual offenders are insecure, which is why they attempt to be powerful over others.
- Basic self-defense moves. That includes getting out of the grasp of someone grabbing you from behind. As one mother told her 12-year-old daughter, "If any person touches you inappropriately or grabs you and tries to get you to go with them, it's no-holds-barred. You bite, punch, and kick where it counts. I mean that. Don't worry about the other person."
- Commonsense tactics. If someone approaches you on the street, run for a building that has lights on and people inside. Yelling "Fire!" more easily gets a bystander's attention than commands like "Stop!" or "Help me!"

- When to fight and when to walk away . . . or run. With weapons so readily available and anger at its height in our nation, the ante is upped. Kids today no longer deal only with a bloody nose after fists on the playground. The stakes are deadly with handguns and knives.

Discrimination

Anyone who is “different” faces discrimination. It could be based on race, gender, special needs, adoption, or anything else that flags you as not the same as others in a group.

We’ve come a long way since 1951, when Oliver Brown tried to enroll Ruby, his African American daughter, into an all-white public school in Kansas. She was rejected simply because of her skin color.⁶ Schools may have been desegregated back in the 1960s, but that doesn’t mean racial tension has disappeared. Far from it. Events such as the shootings in Ferguson, Dallas, and Charleston, and angry standoffs between Chicago’s police and the black community, show that prejudice remains a tragic issue for America.

But black-white prejudice isn’t the only discrimination. In today’s politically charged environment, those who don’t speak English as their first language, are from Middle Eastern countries, or adopt specific religious traditions from their home country can be targets of hate crimes.

Children who are born with special needs or need additional assistance because of an accident or injury are treated differently from their “normal” peers. As Jamie said, “Why do people have to look at me that way? I’m just me.”

Adopted kids face detractors who say they can’t be loved as much by their parents because they aren’t “biologically connected.” Also, children whose ethnicity is different from their adoptive parents or who have parents of two distinct ethnicities often face prejudicial comments from classmates.

As Rhia told me, "I'm not black and I'm not white. Nobody knows how to treat me or what to say to me."

The same is true of LGBTQ youth. However, they often get hit harder because discrimination doesn't come only from outside sources; it also comes from their own families. No matter where you stand on the issue, it's one that can't be ignored.

When medical student Josh Eloge researched the causes of homelessness, he discovered a large number of the homeless population—an estimated 320,000 to 400,000 in the US—were LGBTQ youth. On average, they became homeless for the first time at age 14. Why? Because they ran away or were forced to leave when their families rejected them based on their sexual identity . . . even when many didn't disclose their sexual identity until *after* they became homeless. Because of the discrimination they face, these youth are much more likely to face substance abuse and mental health issues.⁷

No one, it seems, is safe from prejudice. Tests such as the IAT (Implicit Association Test), a long-term research project based at Harvard University, show that "very few of us are totally without prejudice of one form or another."⁸ If you don't believe it, take the test yourself at www.implicit.harvard.edu.

As a parent, you want your child to be socially adept, understanding that not everyone is the same. But what do you do, for example, if you are in a predominantly Caucasian, upwardly mobile area and your kids aren't growing up with a lot of people of varying ethnic origins? Can you force them into accepting people who are different from them? No, you can't.

Instead, realizing that prejudice is a part of our world, bring up the topic with your kid around the dinner table. "I've been seeing a lot of news articles lately about the tension between [*name the issue*]. I'm wondering if you see any of that going on in your school or our neighborhood. If so, how do you handle it?" With such an approach, you can basically talk to your child about anything.

Or you could say, “Wow, it seems like kids are going out of their way to be unkind these days. I’m curious, because I don’t go to school every day anymore, but you do—have you experienced any of that yourself?”

Anytime you say to a kid, “I’m curious what you think,” you shower your child with respect. You’re saying, “You matter in life, and in *my* life. What you think is important. What you feel is important. And guess what? It’s okay to be different. We don’t have to be all the same. There is great value in variety.”

Yet, because of that variety, some people will be hateful, narrow-minded, and flagrantly disrespectful of others and their opinions.

If you have a different view, you’re slammed with a label you don’t appreciate. Others take the view that everyone ought to do what they feel is right, and anything goes . . . as long as it’s not murder. Still others don’t want to judge, so they don’t stand up for anything or anyone.

Where is the fine line?

You should draw lines in the sand for how to behave within your family and stick to those. If you don’t stand for something, you won’t amount to much. However, foisting those same personal guidelines on others is a dangerous and divisive game.

A year ago I talked to someone who was described to me as a strong man of faith. His daughter had left that faith in the dust when she left home, but she cared enough about her dad to show up at his house six months later with her surprise fiancé. Problem was, the fiancé was tatted up from head to toe, and the father didn’t find that acceptable. Nor did he find the young man’s language acceptable.

“So what did you do?” I asked the father.

He scowled. “I told him he wasn’t welcome in my house looking like that and talking like that.”

.....
“It’s okay to be
different. We don’t
have to be all the
same. There is great
value in variety.”
.....

The rest of their conversation—or lack thereof—was what I'd expected.

The young man had used choice words to tell the father what to do with himself and left the house in a huff. What did the daughter do? She gave her dad the evil eye and followed her fiancé.

Father and daughter have been estranged ever since. Neither will give in. Because that father couldn't adjust his expectations and accept someone who was different, he lost his daughter and his son-in-law-to-be.

We all have biases. We don't like this or don't like that. Most of the time it's because we're uncomfortable, so we avoid "that type of person." But if we spend our time and energy checking off a list of things we don't like about that person, we'll never have a relationship with them. Just like that father.

When you rear kids, you have no idea who they will bring home to marry. You may think you know, but you don't. Accept whoever comes in the door with open arms. If you don't, you will shut out your daughter or son, who has chosen that person.

Does that mean you agree with everything that person does? No, but you choose not to look only at the outside. You take time to get to know the inside.

My mantra is, "It never hurts to be kind." Leave the judgment part up to Almighty God, where it belongs.

Whoever your child brings home at any age—whether a friend or potential marriage partner—is their choice. To stay included in

~~~~~  
**If you don't stand for something, you won't amount to much. However, foisting those same personal guidelines on others is a dangerous and divisive game.**  
~~~~~

~~~~~  
**My mantra is, "It never hurts to be kind." Leave the judgment part up to Almighty God, where it belongs.**  
~~~~~

your child's life, you need to accept and welcome that person, even if doing so is out of your comfort zone.

Gangbangers

When I was a kid, I remember going to a park to play softball and getting kicked out by a neighborhood gang. I was told, “Hey, it’s our turf. Get lost.” That was years ago, and gangs are still staking their territory. Only now the stakes are higher.

Many of the deaths in Chicago—the current leading “Murder City” in our nation, surpassing New York City and Los Angeles—are gang related. They’re retaliation murders from rival gangs or a result of territory warfare over drug sales.

If you and your family live in a small town, you’re probably not worried about your child getting caught in the midst of gang crossfire. However, what happens when your teenager hops on the train to downtown Chicago, gets on the wrong EL on the way home, and ends up in gang territory? Such things do happen.

The better informed you and your child are, the calmer and more confident your child will be in any situation.

Take Carmen, a suburban 19-year-old who spent every Saturday for a year working solo with kids in Cabrini-Green, one of the poorest and most dangerous sections of Chicago. One look at her and you’d think that petite redhead could be blown over by a puff of wind. But she was empowered with knowledge that made her formidable—she knew that gangs existed because of a deep craving for acceptance. Everybody wants to be part of a group. If they don’t get that in a positive way from family, they’ll seek belonging elsewhere.

Her secret to win the kids’ hearts? She started by bringing a backpack filled with treats and simple games. When she saw children playing in the dirt, she sat in the dirt near them and took out the treats and games. The children’s curiosity won over their

learned guardedness. Soon they gathered to eat, talk, and laugh. The next Saturday she was surrounded with those same children . . . and more.

Gradually she won the moms' respect by braiding hair, doing laundry, washing dishes, changing diapers—anything they were doing. No task was below her. She showed interest in learning how to cook their ethnic dishes.

Meanwhile, the men would linger back by the buildings, simply watching this white girl who didn't shrink back from their tough environment but accepted it as it was. Little by little, they began to interact with her in conversation.

One day four months later, it was already dark when she prepared to leave. Four young men approached her. "It's not safe to be here," one told her. They said something was about to go down with a rival gang and personally escorted her to the EL.

A young woman from the suburbs had won even gangbangers' hearts through the power of kindness.

Six years later, Carmen and her husband have continued her work in another area of Chicago-land with two different gangs.

Think for a second. That young woman could have spent her time being afraid of gang members. Instead, she realized that we are all fighting for the same thing—to be accepted for who we are and treated with respect, regardless of our situation in life. That truth empowered her to make connections that otherwise would have been impossible.

How do you respond to those who differ from you in background, social status, ethnicity, etc.? Do you accept them for who they are? Treat them with respect and a courteous attitude? Or do

.....
**We are all fighting
for the same thing—
to be accepted for
who we are and
treated with respect,
regardless of our
situation in life.**
.....

you hang back because they're different from you, and that makes them threatening?

Your child is watching you. How you respond in all situations becomes a model for how they will respond. So teach your kids how to be safe in uncertain environments. Teach them that not everyone has their best interests at heart, so they need to be careful. However, *you* be careful of categorizing people rather than considering them individually. Everyone wants to belong somewhere.

The “Whatever” Generation

You see on the news that there's a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida. The perpetrator shot five people and then killed himself. How do most of us respond?

We shake our heads and say, “Wow, what a crazy society.”

Then, a minute later, we add, “Pass the potatoes.”

We've been bombarded with so much violence in the news that most of us are anesthetized. That's particularly true of the majority of today's kids, who have grown up saturated with media stories of school shootings, gang violence, rape, terrorism, and war in places they've never been to. With instant access via the internet to anything happening in the world, they've read about so many of these tragic events that they're numb.

That's why they aren't likely to pay more than cursory attention to a terrorist attack in Israel. It's too far out of their everyday sphere. Yet they could tell you in a split second the title of the latest hit or what shenanigans their favorite artist is up to. They know what singers have fallen on stage or got caught driving drunk in the last month. They have earned professional degrees in Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook.

However, very few have any idea of basic historical facts about their own country. For example, a late-night TV show host went

out onto the streets of New York City and asked kids these simple questions:

- Who is the vice president of the United States?
- When did the United States become a country?
- Who was our first president?
- Who fought in the Civil War?
- What was the Revolutionary War about?

Most kids had no idea.

Parents continually worry about the broader issues—about their child's safety and how knowledge of what's going on in the world will impact their children emotionally. I know, because parents ask me about these issues as I travel around the country. They're concerned that terrorist attempts and school shootings will instill fear in their kids and damage their psyches.

The reality is, today's kids are too busy trying to stay alive in their own competitive sphere of peers to think about anything outside of it. Yes, they know what's going on—they're internet junkies, after all—but most of the time they aren't fearful or hurt by those issues, unless the issues become personal (see chapter 2).

The Exceptions—Sensitive Children

In some cases, with particularly sensitive children, knowledge of violent events outside their world can lead to uncertainty and fear.

One 7-year-old was traumatized by watching a *National Geographic* special about baby birds in Africa killed by a swarm of bees that invaded their nest. Her father, a nature enthusiast, had thought nothing about letting his daughter watch the special with him . . . until she woke up with a nightmare. It was her first brush with death, violence, and the reality that bad things happen on planet earth.

Parents of children who are exceptionally sensitive to visual input need to be cautious not only about what their children view on TV or in movies but also about putting a smartphone into their children's hands too early. Give them a cell phone where they can call you, but limit their internet access if possible. If a *National Geographic* special traumatizes her, what she can access on the internet in a click or two will do much more damage.

How much of life's
harsh realities can
your child handle?
Only you can answer
that question.

You can't isolate your child from all the dangers and terrors of the world, nor should you. Bubble-wrapping your child will only harm her more when trouble hits personally, if she hasn't learned to grapple with the realities that bad things do indeed happen and life is not always fair.

Kids mature physically at different ages. They also mature psychologically at different ages. How much of life's harsh realities can your child handle? Only you can answer that question.

It all comes down to these questions: How well do you know your child? How will your child respond? Some children are greatly affected by outside stimuli.

Your 8-year-old sees footage of a shooting and gets a little scared. "Dad, what if that happened at my school? What would I do? Would I die?"

Now the parental roles you need to play are those of balancer and comforter. "That was a terrible thing. I saw it on TV this morning too. Sometimes bad things like that happen. But that kind of thing hasn't happened in our area. That school is 2,000 miles away. It would take us four days driving from morning to night to get there. We'd have to stay in a hotel three nights and eat breakfast somewhere else for four days just to reach that school."

Usually, by this time, a younger child will be sidetracked. You've answered his immediate question of, "What if that happened at

my school?" His fear and uncertainty have dimmed because of your reassurance.

Younger children need you to minimize the news and reassure them that they are safe. In such a role you are the psychological blankie for your child.

If the question and fear come from your 15-year-old, you might say, "That was terrible, wasn't it? I can't imagine how devastated I'd be if that happened to you. I feel so bad for the families of the kids who died. They must be hurting terribly. But I'm also sad for the family of the kid who did the shooting. He must have been very angry at the world to do that. What do you think could make a kid so upset he'd want to hurt others?"

.....
**You are the
psychological
blankie for
your child.**
.....

Older children also need your reassurance, but they don't need you to minimize the news. They need a context in which to deal with the news.

You don't need to chase down every malady known to human-kind. Instead, you should answer the questions your child asks. When he is satisfied with the answer and has enough information, he'll stop asking. That's how you'll know how much to say and not say.

So take your cues from your child. If your daughter brings up a topic for the second or third time, you should pay attention to that smoke. Underneath it there's a high probability of a fire. Something is going on in her life that she is either wondering about or experiencing. She's testing the waters by seeing how you'll react to the initial topic.

For example, your daughter asks you about firearms, and you're startled. *Why is she asking me about guns? When was she ever interested in guns?*

Jumping on her for asking about the topic won't further your conversation. Instead, try, "Tell me more about that."

When she sees you're not freaking out at the question but are willing to gather more information, you'll find out she overheard two kids at school talking about getting even with a teacher. She's a little worried, since she likes that teacher.

Most kids aren't going to share easily with their parent what's going on in their lives. Their thoughts percolate.

Back when we used to brew coffee in percolator coffee makers, you'd first hear just a little pop. Then, when you heard a second pop, you knew the coffee was percolating. Within a short period of time, there would be a string of pops. Soon the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee would fill the air.

The same process happens with kids and thoughts. You have to wait patiently and listen for the pops. If there are multiples, a situation is brewing.

Children are naturally self-oriented. In order to grow empathy for those who are less fortunate and to become a contributing member of today's global society, they need to become aware of happenings in their own area and country and around the world.

No child can be truly grateful for what she has until she realizes that others live very differently. The most wonderful gift you can give your child is to grow her heart—to model and establish gratefulness as a daily occurrence in your home.

Practical Ways to Respond to “Out There” Issues

There's a fascinating movie called *Sully* about the American pilot Chesley Sullenberger, who became a hero after he landed his damaged plane on the Hudson River in order to save those on board. Even under extreme duress, he stayed focused and brought that airplane to rest safely.

When your child is hurting, that's the kind of role you need to play. Though you're under extreme duress in light of the circum-

stances and feeling your child's pain, you need to stay focused to help bring your family's plane to rest safely.

How can you respond practically to these larger world issues over which you have little or no control?

Give your child the gift of as much childhood as possible.

In the race to protect their kids against the evils of society, some parents overburden them with too much information. An example is stranger danger. Many parents overemphasize this danger, actually *creating* a fear in their children that wouldn't be there otherwise.

You certainly want your child to learn how to be careful because not everyone is kind, but your method of instruction shouldn't create fear that destroys innocence. If so, you end their childhood too soon—all of your own volition.

In the case of stranger danger, you don't need to say to a 5-year-old, "There are some very bad people who could hurt you, so you have to be careful. If anybody approaches you, then . . ."

Instead, keep it simple, especially with younger children. "Mommy or Daddy will always pick you up after school. If anyone tells you we sent them to get you, don't go with them. Run toward a teacher on the playground. Tell her what happened."

By saying something like that, you're introducing the possibility that an event like that might happen, so the child isn't surprised. Even more, you're preparing her with steps of what to do if that event does occur:

Step 1: Don't believe that person or get in the car.

Step 2: Go tell a teacher what happened.

Those steps keep the action plan simple, so your child is more likely to remember and not be fooled by a stranger.

With today's broken homes, though, it gets a bit more complicated. Some divorcing couples or exes use their children as pawns

against each other. Sadly, many children who are reported as kidnapped are actually taken by family members, says the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, which “intakes reports of missing children, including children who have been abducted, wrongfully retained or concealed by a parent or other family member.”⁹ If this is a situation you might find yourself in, knowing next steps up front would be extremely helpful to you.

You can also talk with the child’s teacher and administration about any concerns you might have and provide paperwork to back up your statements. Note that this should be done with the adults at the school so that they are aware of any danger, but not with your child in the room.

If your child needs to know that he shouldn’t go with Daddy, then if Daddy might try to pick him up from school, you can handle it with a simple comment like this: “Do you remember that Daddy sometimes got really angry and threw things? He needs time to work on that. So if he comes to pick you up at school, don’t get in his car. Go back into the building and tell an adult in the office. They’ll call me.”

.....
**As I always told my
kids, “That little ‘uh-
oh’ you hear inside
is there for a reason.”**
.....

Your child doesn’t need to know all the ins and outs of your child support agreement. He just needs the basics to keep him safe. As he gets older, he’ll learn more about his father’s character,

or lack thereof. Saying negative things about Daddy won’t be helpful to either of you. Because he has been a part of your son’s life, even a negative one, your son will feel his absence from your home.

In cases of separation or divorce, you walk a fine line between keeping childhood innocence intact and ensuring your child’s safety in light of the grim realities of your daily battle with your ex or soon-to-be ex.

In facing the general ills of society, you can inoculate your child *and* teach basic street smarts without introducing fear. As I always told my kids, "That little 'uh-oh' you hear inside is there for a reason. It pops up to warn you that something is going on you should pay attention to. You shouldn't walk that direction, or you should avoid that potential conflict. Pay attention to that little voice."

Answer only the questions asked.

If a child asks you what time it is, you'd answer his question, right? You wouldn't develop an editorial position and expound for half an hour on how clocks are made, where they're manufactured, and all the types of facilities where they're sold, would you? You'd just tell him the time. That's all your child is asking. He only wants to know if he should put his shoes on so he's ready to get to his soccer match on schedule.

When children ask questions about bad things that happen to others in the world, you answer the question they ask, and no more. The answer you give must be age-appropriate and have as little additional information as possible. If your child wants to know more, he will ask. If that answer doesn't satisfy him, he'll ask more. It's best

to err on the side of too little information than too much. Children are naturally curious. They'll push until they are satisfied. So don't jump on the full bandwagon too soon.

Most parents think the topic of sex, for example, is a one-shot deal. You have "the talk" sometime in middle school, suffer through one uncomfortable big night of lecturing, and it's over.

Not so. The subject should be introduced a bit at a time as kids have questions. Seeing horses getting frisky at a local barn, the

It's best to err on the side of too little information than too much. Children are naturally curious. They'll push until they are satisfied.

Five Top To-Dos for Parents

- Tell the truth in love. Bad things happen to good people. It's a fact of life.
- Acknowledge that life isn't always fair or just.
- Balance your protective instinct with preparing your child for life on their own.
- Don't promote the victim mentality. It negatively shapes a child's worldview.
- Approach all life lessons as a learning experience.

announcement of a new baby in someone's family, or an awareness that boys and girls cover different body parts in swimsuits can kick off interesting discussions.

Again, answer only the questions your child asks, and no more, in age-appropriate lingo. When you do that, you're setting yourself up as the source of trusted information. Do that when they're age 5, and it's amazing what they'll feel comfortable asking you when they're 12, 13, 15, or even 17.

Nobody knows your child as well as you do. You can tell by his expression whether you've connected with him. If you answered his question honestly and provided the information he desires, he'll be satisfied. He'll walk away or switch to another subject.

Then you'll know you're through with that minor crisis . . . and ready for the next one.

Because there definitely will be a next one. It's a given in parenting.

Provide balance.

Let me assure you bluntly of one unchangeable fact. Just when you've weathered one storm in parenting, there will be another

one around the corner. Sometimes you'll be acting like an air traffic controller in the tower. Other days you'll be in the middle of the Running of the Bulls. Every parent wonders some days, *Holy cow, what's next?*

How you respond to each situation, though, is what's most important to your child's sense of stability and security. Why? Because you're the most important person in your child's life. You're their best role model of how to live life.

It's time to read your own barometer. What do you get anxious about in regard to your kids?

Violence is all around us. In the last 30 days, while I've been writing this book, there have been three incidents in England alone. You want your children to have a balanced approach to life—aware of the big dangers but not becoming incapacitated by or fearful of them—so how do you respond to the “out there” issues?

Be honest. “I saw that report too. There *are* people who are mean and want to hurt others, like the guy you saw on the news. But most are good people, helpful people. Like your teacher, Mrs. Jones, and Grandma and Grandpa. And remember when we got a flat tire last summer and Mommy didn't know what to do? A guy came along in a pickup and changed the tire.”

Your child says, “Oh yeah, I remember that. We were on a road all by ourselves. It was so hot, and he was really nice.”

So in that conversation, you've told your child that not all people are good and helpful, but most are. On one hand, he's seen the news report about the mean person. On the other hand, you've provided the balance by reminding him of the kind man who helped you out when you were stranded.

Solicit your child's thoughts and solutions.

One of the best conduits for conversations is the dinner table. Many families don't eat together because they're all running in

separate directions. They catch food on the fly. But some of the Leman family's most stimulating conversations took place as we ate together.

When a big event such as a terrorist bombing happens, it's the smart parent who says to her 15-year-old, "Wow, it seems so crazy what's happening in the UK. I'm sure you saw it too. Another bombing. And this time . . . [*give a few details to show you paid attention*]. I'm still struggling with how I feel about that. Why would somebody do that? Frankly, I don't have any answers. I'd love to know what you think. Sometimes things that happen like that seem so far away, like an unreal movie. Other times they scare the pants off me, wondering what if it happened in our town."

Anytime you tell a child, "I'd love to know what you think" or "I'm curious about what you think," you are treating her as a social equal. You're inviting conversation and creating a relationship where your daughter can talk to you about anything, even things not easy to discuss.

That's how you solicit conversation from your teenager. Difficult issues and horrific events surround us every day. But getting your child to talk about them, well, that's another matter.

If you want your child to keep talking to you, toss out a topic and see if she bites on it. If so, open the conversation. If not, let it go. You'll have another opportunity soon.

Often the best way to get your older child to talk is for you to shut up and listen.

Create an environment of safety.

Your child's world is really quite small. It's his house or apartment, parent(s), siblings, grandma and grandpa, and the family dog. He has his preschool, kindergarten, or elementary school. He doesn't go far—maybe to the grocery store or to the park to play. He needs to know and feel safe in that defined world.

You, parent, are the only one who can create that environment of safety. So when your toddler falls, what do you do? You kiss his boo-boo, and life is instantly better. You become the parent who can solve anything.

As your child grows older, more people enter his world. It becomes larger. More questions surface and more issues are introduced. But home remains a secure environment. Home is the place with unconditional love and a predictable routine.

In middle school and high school, students do become aware of more "out there" things. There will be times when those bigger global issues will intersect with your child and hurt her. That's when she will ask, "Why did this happen to me?" She will experience frustration, fear, and anger. She won't have the longer-life perspective that adults have to know that bad things do indeed happen to good people.

But you remain calm. You know two very important things:

1. No one is immune to the power of these overarching big issues. They were going to hit sometime. It's best for them to happen in her world when you're there to walk alongside her.
2. It isn't the issues themselves but your child's *responses* to them that will help shape her character and direct her next moves.

You're not helpless. You don't have to be a bench sitter, watching life go by. You can choose to step up to the plate and be the parent you need to be for your child's sake. That means you'll make tough decisions. You'll say no when you need to. You'll encourage your child. You'll be her advocate.

As my daughter Hannah—communications director for Children's HopeChest, a global orphan-care organization—says, "We believe that life isn't always black and white, and that in the gray

and the messiness of life is where transformation happens and life is truly lived out.”¹⁰

Every child longs for a hero. The best hero of all is you, because you aren't afraid of that messiness. Because you love your child unconditionally, you simply roll up your sleeves and plunge in.

You can't control what is “out there,” but you can control what happens inside your home. So be the champion she needs you to be.