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Why we must resist the urge to lie to our children

By Maria Tumarkin

As a society, we must not flinch from exposing children to harsh realities.

One measure of a wholesome, civilised society is that its children are not continuously exposed to the realities of violence and loss. As citizens, parents, educators, passers-by, many of us see it as our duty to shield children from other people's pain, despair and fear. Turn off the television when death is not an aerial shot, when it becomes humanised, ordinary and inconsolable. Cover their eyes when someone is being kicked and spat at in the streets. Leave them home, all snuggly and safe, when going to a funeral of their beloved nana.

I wonder what makes so many of us assume that humanity at its most violent or violated is not for children's eyes. Do we think our children will grow up never having to face pain, loss or injustice? Do we believe that they are simply too young to take it all in, that the knowledge of violence and loss will wound and confuse them bitterly and unnecessarily?

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in the US, Australia and across the Western world, there has been a huge outcry from parents and educators who simply did not know what to do or say to children, in school and at home. The desire to shelter, to shield, to protect, had crumbled under the enormity and the all-pervasive nature of death, uncertainty and terror. A fake world - snuggly and secure - could not be sustained as civilised and secure citizens of civilised and secure nations became engulfed by a sense of fear and dread.

In response to millions of people deeply uncertain about what to say and how to behave around children, various psychological and educational associations across the Western world put out guidelines. The guidelines, predictably enough, promoted talking to children, urging them to express their emotions freely. Families and educators were instructed to reassure children continuously of the safety of their surroundings and the natural character of their emotions, no matter how extreme.

These rushed guidelines, often fogged by therapeutic lingo, even more often patronising to children, offered nothing more than the oddly-shaped Band-Aids for wounded children's souls.

Now, more than 18 months later, it is no exaggeration to say that we are not ready for what is to come. Not ready for the war that has just begun. Not ready for its aftermath, which promises to be far more prolonged and terrifying than the military showdown itself. We are not ready, not because the
psychological guidelines need to be expanded or rewritten, but because so many of us are confused by where precisely our primary responsibility to children lies at a time like this.

Any civilised society in the throes of a world-changing upheaval, the long-term consequences of which cannot be predicted even by the most arrogant of its political and military elite, has to reconsider its attitude to children. At times like these, to shelter our children from the continuing and inescapable realities and histories of loss, death and injustice is not an act of care but, rather, of gross negligence; an abuse of our moral responsibility as citizens and parents.

What we need to give to children at a time like this is neither a half-baked illusionary world where things are as they always have been, nor an insulting hybrid of debriefing and art therapy sessions. We need to give them exactly what we need to find within ourselves - the knowledge and the emotional resilience to cope with the world as it is, out of control, uncertain and scared of what is to come.

This is something that needs to be done now, today, not as an afterthought, not as a damage-control measure when things go haywire. The decision to respect our children's right to know just what exactly we have got ourselves into needs to be conscious; not a reflection on our vulnerability and confusion, but a measure of our deep, all-consuming concern for our children's emotional and physical well-being.

Never lie to your children. They sense it every time you do. It's in-built. They have the best, the most accurate bullshit detectors you will ever come across. Now, as we are entering a truly uncharted terrain, is the worst time to lie. If you are part of a civilised society, that is.

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