Telling the Truth About World Problems

A point worth mentioning here pertains to the controversy of "to tell the truth or not to tell the truth." If the child has trusted the teacher with a worry, then he trusts the teacher for a truthful reply. There is an enormous debate about age-appropriate responses and at what age it is appropriate to be honest with children. The child has asked a tough question for which there are no easy answers. But a tough question cannot be deleted, watered down, or ignored. It is my firm belief that no matter what the child's age, the truth is the best possible answer.

Of course, some ways to handle the truth are better or less anxiety-inducing than others. For instance, if the question is about children dying of famine in South Africa ("Will more kids die?") or about being killed in Iraq ("Will soldiers kill kids?"), attempting to lessen the severity of the situation in an attempt to protect the child by denying the reality will not help. In most cases, the child knows the answer already, and a falsehood, even a "little white lie," could cause even further concern. *Why won't teacher tell me the truth? Is it that bad? Am I going to die too?* Honest talk is needed. An honest answer without gory or embellished details is best. For example, the teacher might agree that that war (disease, famine) is terrible and then say we have little control over it, and yes, some children might die. This answer will reassure the child that the teacher is seriously considering what he said and is giving an honest answer. The teacher then follows this up with reassurances about the immediate safety of the child or children. Because the initial answer has been honest and straightforward, the child will believe the reassurances and feel less worried. However, if the teacher had lied initially by offering pat phrases or platitudes (e.g., "We have nothing to worry about because we are good people"), the child will recognize a falsehood immediately and put no faith in the reassurances.

By *reassuring* I mean to state concisely and simply that everything is being done to protect the child. "Some children might die, but this is happening far away and there is no chance of soldiers coming here or killing children here because we have troops to protect us, and the war is not here in . . ." When possible, say exactly what this "protection" is and attempt to defuse worries that are inappropriate or exaggerated. Again, it is important to tell the truth. Lying is actually easier for the adult. ("No, of course, no kids will be hurt — soldiers don't kill kids.") But it can create more fears and questions. Be honest. Be empathetic. Be supportive. Follow, as soon as possible, the steps in Spontaneous Support (see pages 23–24).

"Today" Activities That Can Trigger Children's World Worries

So, what are these worry-triggering activities and situations?

We know that concerned and compassionate adults make every attempt to protect children from pursuits that may trigger concerns, worries, or fears, but in reality, total protection is impossible. As I mentioned previously, children do not live in bubbles; they live in an often nasty and frightening world, and are exposed to its unpleasantness regardless of what adults do or do not do. Certain activities and situations, however, seem to be more conducive to fear and worry than others.

If we can first identify the activities or typical situations that can have profoundly negative effects on children, we can take the next step, which is to remove or at least reduce their involvement with those pursuits. We have no control over

world catastrophes, acts of terrorism, natural disasters, rampant poverty and disease, the easy accessibility of drugs and alcohol, or the failing economy. These conditions exist. Kids know all about them. What we *do* have control over are activities in which our students take part and that tie directly into these world troubles. I refer to these sources of distress as "fear-triggering activities or situations." They are activities that result in, literally, too much information or too readily available product.

As a good example of too much information, a child surfing the Web in an uncontrolled manner could happen upon sites portraying violence, disasters, wars, and so on. The fear-triggering activity, in this case, is the Web surfing without controls. In a perfect world, there would be no need for those controls. This is not a perfect world.

Another fear-triggering situation, one related to too readily available product, would be the appearance of drug-peddlers outside elementary schools. In a perfect world, they would never think of approaching young children with their drugs. Again, this is not a perfect world.

Of course, the Internet is not the only source of negatively charged information readily accessible to young people. They are surrounded by visuals, auditory cues, movies, television programs, video games, and peers who think they know everything. Certain activities, however, lend themselves more readily than others to children's exposure to disturbing material, and over these fear-triggering activities adults can exert some control. These fear-triggering activities or situations are identified in the box below — all adults should be familiar with them. Keep in mind I am dealing only with activities exposing frightening or harmful *world* issues at this point and situations more common today than in the past. There are probably many other instances that negatively affect our students, but teachers mentioned those below most frequently.

Each of these activities is more troublesome today than in the past, I believe, due to the current state of our world as well as the advanced state of technology we *enjoy*. In other words, the fact that these activities exist is a symptom of today's troubled world; they would not have posed the same level of concern when we, for example, attended school because there were fewer *troubles* and information about them was not as easily obtained.

One word of caution: If teachers are to assist children in moving towards independence, then they cannot, *must* not choose to ignore a negative situation when it arises. Children want, and deserve, honesty. They don't want to be given condescending responses, pat phrases, or Pollyanna reports — they want the truth. The cruel facts of life today are a reality. We do our students no good by pretending that negative situations do not exist. As teachers, we must be prepared to deal with topics no matter how painful, sensitive, or depressing they may be, honestly and openly. The trick is in knowing *how* to (see Formula Five: Spontaneous Support Strategy on pages

I appreciate that teachers do not always have the time to stop what they are doing and provide the *full* Spontaneous Support strategy. However, I encourage all adults who encounter a child's sensitive question to follow the steps as soon as possible afterwards. By asking a sensitive question or raising a source of unease, the child has made *you* the significant adult for this particular concern. Keep in mind, too, that if one student expresses a worry, many others will most likely have the same one and will benefit from Spontaneous Support. The good thing about Spontaneous Support is that it can be used for any trouble, worry, concern, or sensitive question that a child or group of children may pose.

Formula Five: Spontaneous Support Strategy

Look, listen, clarify.
Gather information.
Acknowledge and accept feelings.
Provide reassurance.
Lead a liberating activity.

Look, listen, clarify. Pay attention not only to what is being said, but also to nonverbal behaviors, such as hand wringing or lack of eye contact, that may hint at underlying anxiety; then, paraphrase the child's question to see if you have it right. Ask pertinent questions if in doubt. Child says, "I saw on TV that a little boy got his legs blown off and he was just going to school. What if that happened here too? Are the terrorists putting stuff here too?" Teacher paraphrases, "You saw a boy injured and are worried that that might happen to you." Teacher also clarifies by asking, "Did the little boy step on something?" Child answers, "A bomb."

Gather information. Quickly ask questions to determine what the child already knows or doesn't know. Doing this lets you know how much or how little information to provide. Teacher asks, "Do you know where this happened?" "What made you say 'terrorist'? Are you worried about terrorists here in ___?"

Acknowledge and accept feelings. Use positive words that convey your true thoughts. For example, say, "I understand." Avoid meaningless words such as, "It's all okay." Let the child know that his feelings are normal and that you, too, often feel that way. Provide permission to convey feelings by saying something like, "It makes me glad that you can tell me you are worried. I am worried [sad, concerned . . .] too because . . ."

Provide reassurance. Confirm, if true, or weaken if false the child's beliefs as simply as possible. "Yes, you are right. Many children have been killed." Or "I understand how you got the idea that . . . That would make me sad too. But I think the actual case is . . ." If talking with an entire class, summarize their beliefs and provide a simple sentence of truth: "Many of you are worried about injury to yourselves caused by terrorists. It's true that sometimes terrorists do harm to people even here in ___, but the chances of that happening are small, and we are doing everything we can to protect you." Keep the discussion short and to the point — dragging it out might increase fears and concerns. (*Teacher must be worried about this because we've been talking about it for ages.*)

Lead a liberating activity. That is, attempt to turn children's attention to something else, to an activity that will help them "move away" from the concern. This recommendation is not meant to downsize the initial concern, but to help children realize there are other ways to deal with it. For example, you might want to further the initial concern by inviting students, depending on ages, to write letters to or prepare shoeboxes of toiletries for children near or far who are in need or to research terrorist activity at some specific time in history (chosen by the teacher) with the goal being to gain historical awareness. These activities are "liberating" in that they move the students away from worrying about a situation and involve

These liberating activities, combined here for easy access by teachers, will be referred to throughout the book. They are numbered for ready reference in other sections of *Teaching in Troubled Times.*

them in taking some small action(s) that may help. We are all familiar with the I-can't-just-sit-here-and-do-nothing situation when we are worried about someone or something. We need to keep active at times like this, and kids are no different. Taking part in a liberating activity implies doing something, anything, other than worrying. The following list of "some-things" may be helpful.

Liberating activities

Invite students to do any of the following:

1. Explore your feelings by writing about the topic of concern in a journal.
2. Write a script to express feelings related to the topic, and with a few peers, act it out. (This activity is a small-group project but can also involve individual writing of possible "scripts.")
3. Depending on what you've learned about letter writing, write business or friendly letters. You might send queries to members of Parliament or other politicians, friendly letters to peacekeepers overseas, or letters of complaint to local media for airing upsetting footage of people in a disaster zone at a time when young children may be part of the audience.
4. Collect practical items (e.g., paper, pencils, toothbrushes) to make care packages for children in underdeveloped countries or for the poor in your community. It may be possible to support a campaign such as Operation Backpack by which Ontario's York Region Food Network gives out appropriately filled backpacks through the region's food banks.
5. Develop and carry out a plan to earn money to aid children living in poverty, either at home or abroad.
6. As a class, earn money to sponsor a child. It's important not to drop this sponsorship once it has been started, so plan for others to carry on when you leave off. Consider establishing a minimum sponsorship term, perhaps five years.
7. Create colorful posters drawing attention to the positives in your own environment (e.g., food, water, shelter).
8. Fantasize a perfect world and then write about it or illustrate it.
9. Arrange for someone in the community to talk to the class about an area of concern. Perhaps a military person could talk about our country's role in Afghanistan.
10. In groups, create lists of positive ideas for someone who has the power to change the world.
11. Collect new and used picture books, and arrange to send them to underdeveloped countries, Aboriginal communities, or local neighborhoods where poverty is recognized to be an issue. Look for vibrant pictures and simple text, especially if the books are to go to a community that speaks little English.
12. Create cartoon strips either using stick figures or filling in speech balloons that have been whitened out on favorite cartoons from a local newspaper. Cut out a cartoon, remove the text, and write your own "liberating" text. For example: "I'm so tired of eating dog food," a dog thinks. "I need someone to sponsor me and feed me properly."
13. Assume the identity of a favorite cartoon character (e.g., Charlie Brown) or super hero (e.g., Wolverine) and write a letter of complaint on an issue of concern from that point of view. You will likely find that you can write more freely and express feelings you might otherwise have difficulty expressing.

14. Write poetry about the troubling idea — doing so has an amazingly cathartic effect on most kids. The two forms I recommend are acrostics and free verse, both outlined below. Later, display the poetry in a hall so that other students can benefit from it. You might call the display "No Fear Here."

Poetry for Liberation

Acrostic (perfect for Grades 1–4)

- Start with the "worry word" written vertically.
- Add a phrase or a couple of describing words, the first word of which starts with the letter on that line.
- Encourage kids to use positive words only on the final line.

Worry Word: "Wars"

Acrostic
W orld fighting
A ll over the planet
R eally scary
S afe here at home in ____

Free Verse (perfect for older kids)

The uninhibited freedom of writing free verse appeals to children who can write thoughts in whatever form they want. Encourage them to use good descriptive words and phrases, and to end on a positive note. The example above was written by a 12-year-old girl.

Free Verse
Wars,
Every day I hear about fighting
Terrifying,
I wonder why
We have to kill each other
I want the world to love
Someday it will.

Musical Interlude

If the students need cheering up, be ready. Keep on hand a selection of music the students enjoy and, if possible, a CD player. A favorite recording artist is Raffi — you can use any of his selections. Although intended for young children, the selections can be enjoyed by people of any age, even adults, if presented with passion and humor. Raffi's "Brush Your Teeth" or a similar silly, repetitive melody will catch attention and bring smiles.

On the other hand: Cautions for teachers

Of course, as with any action a teacher takes, there are those pesky "avoids," the reminders of what *not* to do. Teachers are, happily, human, and like all members of the human race, are flawed. They make mistakes. Sometimes, having a list of things to avoid will help keep them on their toes.

I'll never forget the time a youngster who was known for her worrywart ways and constant whining came to me with yet another concern. I was in the middle of a difficult task on the computer (in honesty, *every* task on the computer was difficult for me) when she made her move.

"Teacher," she whined, "you know that kid who took a gun to school and killed all those kids and teachers?"

"Hmmmm," I replied, only half-listening.

"Well, what if there's a guy here who says he's gonna do that? What if he brings a gun to school and kills everyone too?"

"Oh, Jose," I said, never stopping my fingers tapping at the keys or looking at the girl who was leaning so close I could feel the heat, "that won't happen here. Don't be silly. This is Canada for heaven's sake."

I don't recall what she said after that and it wasn't until later that night I realized how cold and callous I had been. Jose was worried, *really* worried, about a real-life situation and I had downplayed her concern, foolish though I thought it to be; I had been so condescending that memory of my words made me gag. The trouble was real to her. She was right. I was wrong.

The warnings, or things to avoid, appear as a Formula Five. I have written them out as much for my sake as for the sake of others. I hope they will be helpful.