

# Raising a **FEARLESS** CHILD

**MORE THAN 90 PER CENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO CRIME. IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES HOW DO YOU PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BECOMING A FEARFUL, ANXIOUS PERSON?**

**O**NE Monday morning 10-year-old Bongzi Khumalo of Khayelitsha in Cape Town and her mom were walking to the train station as they do every morning at 6 am. From here they travel first to town and

then to Rondebosch in the southern suburbs where Bongzi's mom sees her safely to school before she goes to work as a domestic worker a few blocks away.

But this morning was different. Before they reached the station they were surrounded by three thugs with knives who demanded money and a cellphone. After handing over everything she had Bongzi's mom was stabbed in the arm. Then the men ran away.

That was a year ago but Bongzi still hates the once-pleasant walks to the station. After the incident she was so traumatised that her mom considered sending her to a township school so she didn't have to make the trip to the station in the mornings.

THE South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) receives scores of phone calls concerning traumatised children. A recent call was about a 13-year-old girl who had been raped in a public toilet by a man wearing a ski mask. Another was about a three-year-old boy whose mother had been raped in front of him.

How can you ensure children emotionally survive such experiences? How do you help

them grow up in a crime-ridden country without becoming fearful and anxious?

It's clear they must receive help in time because research shows 91 per cent of South African children are exposed to crime. Even a second-hand experience – such as when a friend experiences crime or when children read about it or see it on TV – can be traumatic.

The result can be a serious condition such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Even worse, children's capacity to experience empathy could be stunted and as adults they could carry on the vicious cycle of violence and crime, Dr Bruce Perry of the Child Trauma Academy in the US says.

## **HOW TO PREPARE YOUR CHILD**

### **BE VIGILANT BUT NOT PARANOID**

There's a difference between making your children paranoid about safety and teaching them to be vigilant, says Professor Tumi Diale, an educational psychologist in Soweto who had to counsel her five-year-old son, Katlego, after their

car was stolen outside a shop.

The example you set is very important, Tumi says. If you live in fear and behave as if you're helpless children sense and see this and become anxious. Children must be reassured continually that their parents are in control.

But be honest with children and tell them why you're behaving in a particular way. The aim is to make your children aware of crime but give them safety skills so they won't feel helpless. This way they become part of the solution.

"My children know we don't go to the bank or the shops between 5 pm and 7 pm because that's when most robberies and hijackings take place," says Marita Rademeyer, a clinical psychologist at the Child Trauma Clinic in Pretoria.

### **MAKE CHILDREN FEEL SECURE**

"Give children plenty of hugs and make them feel loved," says Dr Tessa van Wijk, a Johannesburg trauma expert. Boost their inner strength and positive self-image by encouraging them and making them aware

