

Helping Children Cope With a Disaster

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Whether you're speaking to children about natural and other disasters, terrorist acts/ threats or wartime events, this guide provides detailed age-specific information on how children may respond to the tragedy—and how you can talk to your children about it. *Note*—This guide is for informational purposes only; use this as a guideline and adapt it to the unique needs of your family and children as you see fit.

How Children Respond to a Traumatic Event

Traumatic events are frightening to children and adults alike. Remember that children often look to their parents for support and guidance—and, therefore, they may be affected by your reactions. Be open and honest with your children about your concerns, but try not to alarm or panic them. Children will behave differently depending on their age and how directly they were affected.

Infants/Toddlers

Even infants and young children tend to pick up on the emotional distress of parents and other caregivers. If you are feeling anxious, worried or coping with grief, your child may exhibit physical signs of anxiety and altered behavior, especially since children this young are pre-verbal and cannot express their feelings in words. The most common reactions babies and toddlers have to stress are excessive clinginess and crying; self-stimulating behavior such as pulling on his or her own hair or ears and scratching him or herself; and physical behavior such as head-banging, hitting and aggressive play.

Tips for helping an infant/toddler cope:

- Make sure your child is supervised at all times. If you are unable to be with your child, ask trusted friends, relatives and caregivers to help out. Unless imperative, this may not be the best time to introduce new caregivers, which can compound your child's feelings of anxiety.
- Hold and comfort your child as much as possible—especially when he or she is crying or upset.
- If your child is playing aggressively, redirect him or her to positive activities such as reading a book, listening/dancing to music, blowing bubbles, splashing in a pool/tub, or whatever activity your child finds enjoyable and relaxing.
- Speak in soft tones and be as calm as possible around your child.
- Give your child a lot of attention, and offer a blanket or special stuffed animal, bottles and snacks to help soothe your child.

A baby/toddler's stress may only last for a short time; however, ongoing or repeated exposure to stressful situations may affect your child in the long-term. If you are concerned about any extreme behavior your child is displaying, please consult his or her pediatrician immediately.

Preschoolers (Ages Three to Five)

Preschoolers may find it hard to adjust to stress, change and loss since children at this age have not yet developed their own coping skills. As a result, they must depend on parents, family members and teachers to help them through difficult times. A preschooler may regress following a traumatic event. For example, he or she may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness or “monsters.”

Clinginess, changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it over and over.

Tips for helping a preschooler cope:

- Make sure your child is supervised at all times. If you cannot be with your child, ask trusted friends and family members to help.
- Try to keep daily life as normal as possible and resume regular routines. Children in distress find routines comforting.
- Talk with your child about his or her feelings and listen without judgment. Ask simple questions such as, “How are you feeling?” “Are you scared?” and use simple explanations and reassurances. “I understand how you feel. I will help you.”
- If your child is not verbal, look for nonverbal reactions, such as facial expressions or posture, play behavior, verbal tone or content of your child’s expression—these will offer important clues to his or her reactions.
- Assure your child that you will be there to take care of him or her, and reassure your child often.
- Surround yourself with loved ones, friends, and others who offer comfort and support.
- Help your child regain faith in the future by helping him or her develop plans for activities that will take place later—next week, next month, etc.

- Do not focus on immature behavior; this is a common reaction to trauma. Instead, praise your child often.
- Try not to lecture or teach about the issues until there has been some exploration about what is most important, confusing or troublesome to your child.
- Turn off the TV and radio when your child is around, so as not to scare him or her.
- Spend extra time with your child, if possible.

School-aged Children (Ages Five to 12)

School-aged children may have similar reactions as younger children, including regressing to more childish behaviors. For example, they may ask parents to feed or dress them. In addition, they may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, have difficulty with assignments, become aggressive or have difficulty concentrating. School-aged children may also become more easily upset, crying and whining, and may lose a sense of trust.

Tips for helping a school-aged child cope:

- Be with your child as much as possible.
- Try to keep daily life as normal as possible and resume regular routines. Children in distress find routines comforting.
- Children usually feel better when they can talk about their feelings. To help your child sort out his or her feelings, ask specific questions such as, “How do you feel? Does it make you feel scared? What worries you the most?” Encourage your child to be honest and open, and listen carefully for clues about hidden feelings or worries.
- Ask your child about his or her fears, and acknowledge and reassure your child that the government, the police, parents and teachers are doing everything possible to keep the country safe. Offer your love, support and guidance and say things such as, “I am here to protect you and to help keep you safe.”
- Stress that this is a rare incident, but avoid making false promises such as, “Nothing like this will ever happen to you.”

- Older children should be allowed to watch TV news briefly with parental supervision. Use this as an opportunity to talk to your child about sensitive subjects, such as tolerance and non-violent problem-solving.
- Help your child reach out in support. Put up an American flag at your house or help your child's school organize a food drive or other volunteer effort.

Adolescents (Ages 13 to 18)

Pre-teens and teens are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, schoolwork and other responsibilities they previously handled.

Younger adolescents may compete for attention from parents and teachers while others may withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom. Children at this age are also more likely to begin experimenting with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug use, particularly when dealing with a stressful situation.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. They may be susceptible to feelings or acts of prejudice, retaliation and revenge against certain groups of people. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

Tips for helping an adolescent cope:

- Reassure your child that the government, police, teachers, etc. are doing everything possible to help respond to the disaster and prevent future occurrences. Older teens will be able to grasp the concept more clearly, so have adult conversations with your teen about the government and what is happening—but temper conversations as needed so as not to unnecessarily scare your child.
- Ask your child what he has heard from the media, friends, etc. and clear up any rumors that may cause additional fear.

- Let your child know that it's okay to be scared, upset or angry about what happened. However, teach your child to manage his or her emotions constructively. For example, suggest safe ways to vent emotions, such as exercising or writing in a journal.
- Consider having your teen champion volunteer efforts at his or her school or within the community (e.g., a toy or food drive, or bake sale to raise money at his or her school or community) to show his support for others.

In addition, speak to your child's school administrators. Ask your child's teachers and/or school principal how they are handling the event. Are classes proceeding as normal? Are crisis counselors available? Many schools speak to students about safety issues, and reassure them that they are doing everything possible to keep the children safe. Some schools may instruct teachers to answer questions as needed, but not to push discussions if the students don't seem interested. Several experts suggest that schools should give students the chance to write or draw about their feelings. Keep in close contact with your school's teachers and ask them to keep you apprised of any unusual behaviors your child may display.

Warning Signs

If you notice unusual behavior in your child—at any age—it may be a reaction to stress, fear or trauma. Learn how to recognize the warning signs and seek professional help from a pediatrician, counselor, social worker, psychologist or other professional. The following warning signs may indicate that your child is having difficulty dealing with the effects of a tragic event:

- Refusal to return to school and “clinging” behavior, such as shadowing a parent or caregiver around the house.
- Persistent fears related to the catastrophe (i.e., fears about being permanently separated from parents).
- Sleep disturbances, such as nightmares or bedwetting, persisting more than several days after the event.
- Loss of concentration and irritability.

- Behavior problems; for example, misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical for the child.
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found.
- Withdrawal from family and friends, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with the events of the disaster.
- Speaking or acting out in ways that are excessively aggressive and intolerant of people who belong to another race, religion, etc.
- A change in the way the child plays, such as hitting playmates or breaking toys, or repeating the same game over and over.

Remember, these symptoms are common reactions to anxiety. However, if symptoms persist for longer than six weeks and disrupt your child's daily routine, seek help from a social worker, physician or psychologist.

In Severe Cases

Children who are directly affected by a tragic event (e.g., those with a friend or family member who has been killed or seriously injured) may experience more acute reactions. The most severe form is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), psychological damage that can result from experiencing, witnessing or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic (frightening) event. PTSD rarely appears during the trauma itself. Although its symptoms can occur soon after the event, the disorder often surfaces several months or even years later. Children with this disorder have repeated episodes in which they re-experience the traumatic event. Children often relive the trauma through repetitive play.

Professional advice or treatment for children affected by a disaster—especially those who have witnessed destruction, injury or death—can help prevent or minimize PTSD. A professional can help your child deal with his or her emotions and can provide valuable tips and guidance to parents. In addition, ask your employer if it offers an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, dealing with violence and more.

Coping Tips for the Entire Family

It's important to remember that everyone in your family will be affected by a tragic event, not just children. The following tips can help you and your family support each other during difficult times and begin the healing process together. Again, these will have to be adapted to the age of your children.

- Talk about the event. Encourage family members to describe their feelings.
- Be supportive and non-judgmental.
- Get and give information. Discuss factual information about what caused the disaster. Also, talk about recent changes in your lives. This helps everyone know what is happening and what to expect.
- Don't encourage prejudiced or intolerant ideas or sentiments. Do not judge an entire race or religion based on the extremist actions of a few.
- Maintain standards with children, but be more flexible with less important expectations. For example, your child should try to complete his or her homework each night, but it's less important that he or she receive a perfect grade.
- Be flexible with roles and chores.
- Set priorities and problem solve with input from all family members.

- Allow time to heal. Give yourself and your family time to heal at each person's own pace. Think of healing as a family issue, not an individual one.
- Give and ask for support from family members, friends and the community.
- Review emergency preparedness plans for your household. Improve those areas that need some attention and have your family practice drills.
- Laugh and use humor. Try to lighten up whenever possible.
- Be tolerant and give each other space.
- Giving hugs, tell your loved ones how much they are appreciated and offer praise.
- Use rituals that can support and aid growth and healing.
- After some time has passed, review what has happened with your family. Concentrate on how each person has changed or grown.
- Take time to do fun things and make daily life as normal as possible; once the initial trauma has passed, try to resume your regular routine.

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