

Tips for Talking to Children in Trauma

Interventions at Home for Preschoolers to Adolescents



Children are just as affected as adults are by a disaster or traumatic event. Some may be affected even more, but no one realizes it. Without intending to, we, as parents, may send our children a message that it is not all right to talk about the experience. This may cause confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of helplessness for a child. Children need to hear that it is normal to feel frightened during and after a disaster or traumatic event. When you acknowledge and normalize these feelings for your children, it will help them cope with their experience and move on.

Following exposure to a disaster or traumatic event, children are likely to show signs of stress. Signs include sadness and anxiety, outbursts and tantrums, aggressive behavior, a return to earlier behavior that was outgrown, stomachaches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These reactions are normal and usually do not last long. Whether your child is a preschooler, adolescent, or somewhere in between, you can help your child by following the suggestions below.

Preschooler

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to provide comfort and reassurance.
- Avoid unnecessary separations.
- Permit a child to sleep in the parents' room temporarily.
- Encourage expression of feelings and emotions through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Limit media exposure.
- Develop a safety plan for future incidents.

Elementary Age Children

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior.
- Listen to a child's repeated telling of his/her trauma experience.
- Encourage expression of thoughts and feelings through conversation and play.
- Provide home chores and rehabilitation activities that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Rehearse safety measures for future incidents.
- Point out kind deeds and the ways in which people helped each other during the disaster or traumatic event.

Preadolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Be there to listen to your children, but don't force them to talk about feelings and emotions.



Additional Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20016-3007
Local phone: 202-966-7300
Toll-free: 800-333-7636
Fax: 202-966-2891
Web site: www.aacap.org

National Association of School Psychologists

National Emergency Assistance Team
4340 East West Highway, Suite 402
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: 301-657-0270
Web site: www.nasponline.org/NEAT

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

Yale Child Study Center
230 South Frontage Road, P.O. Box 207900
New Haven, CT 06520-7900
Local phone: 203-785-7047
Toll-free: 877-49 NCCEV (496-2238)
Fax: 203-785-4608
Web site: www.nccev.org/violence/children_terrorism.htm

National Mental Health Association

2001 N. Beauregard Street, 12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
Local phone: 703-684-7742
Toll-free: 800-969-NMHA (6642)
Fax: 703-684-5968
Web site: www.nmha.org/reassurance/anniversary/index.cfm

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

(Information for Children & Adolescents)
P.O. Box 2012
Jessup, MD 20794-2012
Toll-free: 800-480-2520
Web site: www.fema.gov/kids/

National Institute of Mental Health

Office of Communications
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Local phone: 301-443-4513
Toll-free: 866-615-NIMH (6464)
TTY: 301-443-8431
Fax: 301-443-4279
Web site: www.nimh.nih.gov

- Encourage discussion of trauma experiences among peers.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.
- Urge participation in physical activities.
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

It is important to remember that you do not have to “fix” how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with his or her experiences. Healing is an evolving state for most children, but some may need professional help.

If signs of stress do not subside after a few weeks, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional who has special training in working with children. In time, and with help, your children will a return to health.

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

NMH02-0138

9/2005