

HELPING CHILDREN COPE AFTER TRAUMATIC EVENTS

After a traumatic event, the family is often the first-line resource for helping children. If you are concerned about how your child is coping, or your own ability to care for your child during this time, consult with a mental health professional.

Below are some things that parents and other caring adults can do to help after children have been exposed to traumatic events.



GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Remember that all children are different. Your goals is to be patient, understanding, reassuring, and accepting of children's feelings.
- Be honest, but don't give more information than you are asked for. Acknowledge that bad things happen. Explain the violence or the disaster as well as you can, but reassure them that your family is secure, and that you will do everything possible to keep them safe.
- Stay in close contact. Spend more time with your children, using at least part of that time to talk. Provide extra hugs and physical contact.
- Allow your child to discuss the traumatic event or disaster, but do not force it. Encourage them to express their feelings and listen without passing judgment. In discussions, emphasize that they are now safe.
- Listen carefully to your child. Observe their behavior and play.
- To the degree possible, stick to normal routines and schedules. Children fare better if life is stable and predictable. If that is impossible (e.g., after an evacuation) objects like photos and toys that help recreate familiar surroundings can be comforting.
- Children can be expected to have greater difficulty with separations (e.g., school drop-offs and bed times). Providing extra time and reassurance is important.
- Reassure them that the event was not their fault.
- Do not criticize temporary regressive behavior or shame the child.
- Monitor your child's viewing of the disaster or traumatic events on television and other media. Repeated viewing is traumatic.
- Encourage them to spend time with friends, or make new friends.
- Help them feel in control and able to make decisions. Give your child the opportunity to help others — this is one positive way to help them maintain a sense of personal control.



AGE-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Pre-school age children

- Media reports may prove especially confusing and upsetting to this age group. If it's not possible to shield children completely, help them to discern the reality of what they're watching (reassure them that the event is not reoccurring every time footage is replayed).
- Reassure children that they are safe and that you are present. Provide extra comfort and contact (e.g., discuss fears at night, provide contact by phone during the day if you must be separated, extra hugs).

School age children

- Answer questions in clear and simple language.
- Children in this age group will monitor your feelings. You can talk honestly with them about your own reactions and feelings, within limits. False reassurances do not help this age group, but it also does not help them to see you distraught. Intense feelings should be shared with another adult.
- Reassure them that what happened is not their fault.
- Be available and present at bedtime (when fears often get worse). You can remain until they fall asleep, or let them sleep with the light on or in your room for a limited time if necessary.

Adolescents

- Encourage adolescents to work out their concerns and feelings about the events, as adolescents may try and downplay their worries.
- Keep the lines of communication open and remain honest about the impact of these events on your family. Provide reassurance that strong emotions are normal after a traumatic event.

