

Helping Children Cope with Fear and Anxiety

Whether tragic events touch your family personally or are brought into your home via newspapers and television, you can help children cope with the anxiety that violence, death and disasters can cause.

Listening and talking to children about their concerns can reassure them that they will be safe. Start by encouraging them to discuss how they have been affected by what is happening around them. Even young children may have specific questions about tragedies. Children react to stress at their own developmental level.

The *Caring for Every Child's Mental Health* communications campaign offers these pointers for parents/caregivers:

- **Encourage children to ask questions.** Listen to what they say. Provide comfort and assurance that address their specific fears. It is OK to admit you cannot answer all of their questions.
- **Talk on their level.** Communicate with your children in a way they can understand. Do not get too technical or complicated.
- **Find out what frightens them.** Encourage your children to talk about fears they may have. They may worry that someone will harm them at school or that someone will try to hurt you.
- **Focus on the positive.** Reinforce the fact that most people are kind and caring. Remind your child of the heroic actions taken by ordinary people to help victims of tragedy.
- **Pay attention.** Your children's play and drawings may give you a glimpse into their questions or concerns. Ask them to tell you what is going on in the game or the picture. It is an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions, answer questions, and give reassurance.
- **Develop a plan.** Establish a family emergency plan for the future, such as a meeting place where everyone should gather if something unexpected happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your children feel safer.

If you are concerned about your child's reaction to stress or trauma, call your physician or a community mental health center.

The *Caring for Every Child's Mental Health* communications campaign is part of The Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program of the Federal Center for Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Parents and caregivers who wish to learn more about mental well-being in children should call 1-800-789-2647 (toll-free) or visit the Caring for Every Child's Mental Health communications campaign (<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/>) to download a free publications catalog (Order No. CA-0000).

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf

How to Help

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but do not dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing, or playing and to find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster.

Try to maintain normal routines and encourage children to participate in enjoyable activities. Reduce expectations temporarily about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores. Finally, acknowledge that you too may have reactions associated with the traumatic event and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

When to Seek More Help

Consultation with a mental health professional may be useful at any of these times. However, psychiatric consultation should be sought if any of the following is exhibited:

- Excessive fear of something terrible happening to their parents or loved ones.
- Excessive and uncontrollable worry about things, such as unfamiliar people, places or activities.
- Fear of not being able to escape if something goes wrong.
- Suicidal thoughts or the desire to hurt others.
- If the child has hallucinations.
- Expressing feelings of being helpless, hopeless, and worthless.

Additional Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics

Family Readiness Kit—Preparing to Handle Disaster; Helping Children after a Disaster

<https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/aapfrkfull.pdf>

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

Website with multiple games, coloring books, and materials aimed at younger, computer-savvy children.

<https://www.fema.gov/children-and-disasters>

