

Tips for Talking to Children in Trauma

Interventions at Home for Preschoolers to Adolescents



Disasters or traumatic events affect children as much as adults. Some children may be affected without anyone knowing. Without meaning to, parents may make a child feel that it is not all right to talk about the experience. This may cause confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of helplessness in a child. A child needs to hear that many feelings are normal during and after the experience. Knowing this helps a child cope with the experience.

Children often show signs of stress after a traumatic event. Signs may include sadness, tantrums, aggressive behavior, and a return to outgrown behavior. Signs may also include stomachaches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These signs are normal and usually do not last long. You can help your child with the following suggestions.

Preschooler

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to provide comfort and support.
- Avoid separation.
- Allow your child to sleep in the parents' room for a limited time.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Limit media exposure.
- Develop a safety plan for future incidents.

Elementary Age Children

- Provide extra attention.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior.
- Always listen to your child's telling of the experience.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through talk and play.
- Provide home chores and activities that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Rehearse safety measures for future incidents.
- Explain how people helped each other during the event.

Preadolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention.
- Be there to listen to your child, but do not force talk about feelings.
- Encourage discussion of experiences among peers.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.



Additional Resources

Information Clearinghouses

National Mental Health Information Center (NMHIC)

P.O. Box 42557, Washington, DC 20015

(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)

(866) 889-2647 (TDD)

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)

P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847-2345

(800) 729-6686 (English and Español)

(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

www.ncadi.samhsa.gov

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Services Locator

(800) 789-2647 (English and Español)

(866) 889-2647 (TDD)

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

(800) 662-HELP (4357) (Toll-Free,

24-Hour English and Español Treatment Referral Service)

(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

(800) 273-TALK (8255)

SAMHSA National Helpline

(800) 662-HELP (4357) (English and Español)

(800) 487-4889 (TDD)

Workplace Helpline

(800) WORKPLACE (967-5752)

www.workplace.samhsa.gov/helpline/helpline.htm

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.

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- Urge your child to take part in physical activities.
- Support the return to regular activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

You do not have to “fix” how your child feels. Try to help your child understand and cope with the experience. Healing takes time for most children. Some children 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 trained in working with children. Your child will return to health in time and with help.