



Talking to Children After a Trauma

Traumatic events can be scary for both you and your child. Thankfully, there are many things you can do to help your child after a traumatic event.

What exactly is a traumatic event? According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), a traumatic event is “a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity.” After a traumatic event some children may develop traumatic stress, and some may not. Several factors can influence this. Children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are three times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma as a teenager or later. Additionally, the nature and severity of the event, whether the child was actively involved in the incident or a merely a witness, how the child’s immediate caregivers respond, and whether the child had suffered from traumatic stress previously can influence a child’s response to a traumatic event. Children can cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults help them with their experiences.

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How to help child survivors

Understand how children may respond to a traumatic event

- Some children may not ever feel upset or show signs of distress
- Some may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months but then feel upset and show signs of distress
- Being upset over the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear or other things that adults might consider insignificant, but which are important to the child.
- Change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive or may change from being outgoing to shy and afraid.

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Don't minimize the event. Talk with children about how they are feeling and listen without judgement.

- Developing nighttime fears. They may be afraid to sleep alone at night with the light off, to sleep in their own room, or have nightmares or bad dreams.
- Being afraid the event will reoccur.
- Becoming easily upset, crying and whining.
- Losing trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
- Reverting to younger behavior such as bed-wetting and thumb sucking.
- Not wanting parents out of their sight and refusing to go to school or childcare.
- Feeling guilty that they caused the disaster because of something they had said or done.
- Becoming afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
- Having symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.
- Worrying about where they and their family will live.

Start supporting the child as soon as possible after the event.

- Don't minimize the event; talk with the children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment. Let them know they can have their own feelings, which might be different than others. Let the children take their time to figure things out and to have their feelings. Help them learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, mad and scared. Just be sure the words fit their feelings—not yours.
- Don't give children more information than they can handle about the trauma.
- Limit their exposure to additional trauma, including news reports.
- Encourage the children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences.
- Write a story together of the event. You might start with: Once upon a time there was a terrible _____ and it scared us all _____ . This is what happened: _____ . Be sure to end with, "And now we are safe."
- Make puppets with the children and put on a puppet show for family and friends, or help children put on a skit about what they experienced.
- Allow the children to grieve losses.
- Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them. Reassure them many times. Find ways to emphasize that you love them.
- Reassure the children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Stay together as a family as much as possible. If you will be away for a time, tell them where you are going and make sure you return or call at the time you say you will.



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