

Report to PARENTS

Helping Children Cope With Tragedy

Young children shouldn't have to learn about tragic events, but they do. Some are exposed to disasters firsthand, as victims. Others discover the tragedies by watching the news or overhearing adults or other children discussing the events. It is a sad fact that all children need to know how to deal with tragic events—and their parents and caregivers need to know how to help them cope.

IF YOUR CHILD IS THE VICTIM OF A DISASTER:

Try to stay calm. Children often react the way they see adults react. As difficult as it is, it is very important for you to remain calm and reassuring, and to let your children know that, no matter what, they will be taken care of.

Explain, but don't provide unnecessary details. Clearly, children need to know the truth, but they don't need to hear about all of the consequences. Give them the facts that they need to know at that moment, but don't share with them your fears about the future.

Make time to talk to your children. In disastrous situations, adults are often so preoccupied with the immediate needs that they forget their children are aware of what's happening. Make sure they know they can talk to you, and that you'll spend the time they need answering their questions and comforting them.

Get counseling. It is important to help children cope with serious life-changing events. Talk with the school counselor about the situation, then set up a time for your children to come in and "vent." Follow-up appointments with the counselor or other experts can help your children overcome their fears.

IF YOUR CHILD IS AWARE OF A TRAGIC EVENT

Limit TV coverage. Because children can be overwhelmed with the tragedy, limit their TV exposure of the event. Instead, check in periodically with the news, and focus on finding ways to distract your children with other activities.

Be extra comforting. Even if they don't seem to be alarmed, children who are aware of disastrous events can absorb the trauma and be quietly disturbed. Make extra time for quiet activities with your children, such as reading or taking a walk; and give them plenty of hugs.

Watch for behavior changes. Children often don't talk about being afraid, but their behavior can be a clue that they're scared. They might have a hard time sleeping or might wake up from a bad nightmare. Sometimes, they adopt behaviors, like thumb sucking, bedwetting, or baby talk. Others get irrationally angry or sad, and many withdraw and stop socializing. If you see any of these behaviors after a traumatic event, it means your child needs extra help and comfort.

Make sure they know that there are people in charge who are helping.

Children need to know that things will eventually be okay again and that there are adults in charge who are helping to make it right. Talk to your children about the people who are helping resolve the consequences of the disaster, and share your admiration with them about the great work these people are doing.

Do something for others. One way to help children cope in the aftermath of a disaster is to find a way, through your community, to help those affected. Schools, churches, temples, synagogues, and organizations like the Red Cross are great places to go to find out how you and your children can help.

