

Talking to Children in Trauma

Tips for Preschool & Elementary Aged Children and Adolescents

Traumatic events affect children just as much as adults.

Some children may be affected without anyone realizing it. Unknowingly, parents and caregivers may give off the impression that it is not okay to talk about the traumatic experience. This can cause confusion, self-doubt and feelings of helplessness for children and adolescents.



Children need to hear from parents and caregivers that it is normal to feel a range of emotions during and after a traumatic experience. Knowing this will help children cope with the experience and move on.

Common Reactions to Trauma

Children often display signs of stress following a traumatic experience. Common signs of stress may include:

- Sadness
- Outbursts and tantrums
- Aggressive behavior
- Return to outgrown behavior
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Ongoing desire to stay home from school
- Wanting to stay away from friends

All of these reactions are normal for children coping with trauma and usually do not last long. Parents and caregivers can help children with the following suggestions.

Preschool-Aged Children

- Maintain regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to provide comfort and reassurance.
- Limit exposure to television and other forms of media.

- Avoid unnecessary separations.
- Permit a child to sleep in the parents' room temporarily.
- Encourage expression of feelings and emotions through play, drawing and storytelling.
- Develop a family safety plan for future incidents.

Elementary Aged Children

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior.
- Always make time to listen to a child's telling of their traumatic experience.
- Encourage expression of thoughts and feelings through casual conversation and play.
- Provide responsibilities and activities that are structured, but not too demanding
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.
- Point out kind deeds and the ways in which people helped each other during the traumatic event.

Pre-Adolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Encourage discussion of experiences with peers.

- Be there to listen to your children, but don't force them to talk about feelings and emotions.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.
- Urge participation in physical activities.
- Encourage return to regular social and recreational activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

It is important to remember that you do not have to "fix" how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with their experience. Remember that healing takes time. If signs of stress persist or worsen after a few weeks, consider enlisting the help of a mental health professional trained in helping children.

Additional Resources

- **National Mental Health Information Center**
(800) 789-2647
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
- **Mental Health Services Locator**
(800) 789-2647
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
(800) 273-TALK
- **SAMHSA National Helpline**
(800) 662-HELP



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