

Helping Children Cope with Trauma and Loss



1. Ask the child or children what they know about the event and find out what their perceptions are. Don't jump to conclusions. Parents and caregivers should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event, spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.
2. Don't transfer your own fears to your children. Respond to safety issues with calm and reassurance. Often parents' despair interferes with a child's ability to heal. Don't expect your child to take care of your fears. Don't keep your child home from school because you are afraid to be separated from him or her. Find help to cope with your own fears and anxieties.
3. Listen to children but don't force them to share information. Let it come naturally. It is important after a traumatic event to be able to talk about the event. While it may be difficult or tiresome for you to hear the same story over and over, talking is a crucial part of recovery.
4. Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don't try to make it okay. Let the child express fears, thoughts and worries. Reassure children that their feelings are normal and let them use their own words to describe their feelings and/or what happened. Do not try to change those feelings or say they should not feel that way. Let them know that you will not judge, tease or make fun of what they tell you.
5. Allow children to express feelings and share yours with them if and when appropriate. Address the irrationality and suddenness of the event or disaster. Children and adults need their feelings validated. It may be useful to have children paint, draw or write about the event.
6. Reassure children that they are safe and loved, and that people are doing everything possible to make this a safer world (give examples of police, firefighters, rescuers, nurses, doctors, etc.), who may be on TV or helping communities.
7. Review family safety procedures. If the family has none, take this time to establish them.
8. Make sure all caregivers in the child's life, such as teachers, babysitters, daycare providers, friends and neighbors, are aware of the impact of the event on the child.
9. Be honest and provide accurate facts about the event. Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their perception of what happened in order to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.
10. Keep all promises you make to a child during the crisis. In other words, do not make promises you cannot keep. It is important that a child can count on you when all else is in chaos.
11. Address issues of death concretely and factually. Give honest information about the tragedy and deaths based on the child's maturity level. Always be truthful. Avoid euphemisms with children. Tell them that someone died rather than saying someone "went to sleep" or "went away" because younger

children will wonder when they are coming back and will be hurt that they left without saying goodbye.

12. Death in a child's life is inevitable and means different things to children at different ages. Young children ages 1-5 grieve for the threat to their security; children 6 years and older grieve more the actual loss.
13. Older children are drawn together in situations of tragedy and will draw strength and support from each other. Let teens use age-appropriate ways to make themselves feel better; i.e. turning music up loud, talking more than usual to their friends; using social media to express grief constructively, getting involved in humanitarian projects or charities, etc.
14. Spend extra time with each child doing something fun or relaxing and have a family time every day.
15. Remember the importance of touch and hugs.
16. Be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviors and accept signs of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the traumatic incident. Watch for signs of repetitive play or reenactments of the event. (These are normal reactions and can be addressed by trained trauma specialists).
17. Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
18. Connect the child and family to support groups, resources, child trauma specialists or other helpful community resources that can provide information and assistance. Provide play or reading opportunities. Good books include: *Take Time to Relax* by Nancy Carlson, *The Tree that Survived the Winter* by Mary Fahy, *There's Something in My Attic* by Mercer Mayer, *I Hear a Noise* by Diane Goode and the *Knight Who Was Afraid of the Dark* by Barbara Shook Hazen.
19. Assure the child that the events are not their fault.
20. Talk in hopeful terms about the future. This can help a child rebuild trust and faith in his or her own future and the world. Help children return to a "normal" routine as soon as possible.

If you have reason to believe that a child is being harmed within his or her home, contact your county Department of Social Services (DSS) office. If you see suspicious activity or know the abuse occurred outside the home environment, contact your local law enforcement agency. You may contact both DSS and law enforcement. If the child is in immediate danger of substantial harm, contact law enforcement. Only law enforcement can take the child into emergency protective custody without a court order.

Helping Children Cope with Trauma was created by the National Organization for Victim Assistance, Carol Hacker, PhD, CTS, Jayne Crisp, CTS, CVAS, The Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, and CIGNA Behavioral Health Greenville (SC) Mental Health Center