



Helping Children Cope after a Traumatic Incident

When tragedy occurs children may be confused or frightened. They often will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. The most important thing is to let children know that they are safe and protected.

Parents should strive to

- Model calm and control – Children take their emotional cues from adults and parents. We are their role models for coping.
- Identify ways for children to calm themselves
 - Relax through play
 - Talk
 - Art activities
 - Music
 - Deep breathing exercises
- Reassure them that they and their family members are safe.
- Let them know this is a rare event and is unlikely to happen again.
- Highlight and explain how and why they are safe.
- Talk about the ‘heroes’ that may be assisting (police, firemen, military, nurses, doctors etc.)
- Observe children’s emotional state.
 - Children will express their emotions through their behaviors.
 - Be aware of changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns.
 - You can assume that the greater the trauma, the more the behavior will change.
 - You can assume that when the child stabilizes, their behavior will return to what is normal for that child.
- Tell children the truth and stick to the facts.
 - Keep it simple.
 - Don’t minimize.

Children will have different reactions based on their understanding of the event. This is usually determined by the age of the child.

- **Early elementary school children** need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurance that the daily structure of their lives will not change.
- **Upper elementary school/early middle school children** may be more vocal and question their safety.
- **Upper middle school/high school children** may have strong and varying opinions.



Children Benefit From:

- Extra attention: tell them you love them.
- Stay close to them – need for physical proximity.
 - There may be an increase of anxiety at night.
- Check in with your child and talk daily.
 - Ask them what new or additional information they may have heard.
 - Ask them if they have any new questions.
- Strive to return to normal activities
 - They depend on daily routines
 - It provides a sense of things getting back to normal
- Limited TV viewing
 - Process what they have watched about the traumatic incident.
 - Since the goal is to return to normal, children should watch their usual programs.