

Helping Children Cope With Violence and Disasters

Natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, along with violent acts including shootings and terrorist threats or actions, have two consequences. First, they physically harm property and people, often resulting in deaths. Secondly, they cause trauma in survivors of these events. Trauma is harm to a person's body or mind.

Children are very sensitive to upsetting events, and often struggle to make sense of trauma. They may have emotional reactions, or they may hurt deeply. Children also often have a difficult time recovering from frightening experiences.

Parents and family members play important roles in helping children who experience violence or disaster cope with the trauma caused by the event. They should help protect children from further trauma, and find appropriate medical care and counselling. They can also help young people avoid or overcome emotional problems that can result from trauma.

What is trauma?

There are two types of trauma—physical and mental. Physical trauma includes the body's response to serious injury and threat. Mental trauma includes frightening thoughts and painful feelings. They are the mind's response to serious injury. Mental trauma can produce strong feelings. It can also produce extreme behaviors such as intense fear or helplessness, withdrawal or detachment, lack of concentration, irritability, sleep disturbance, aggression, hyper vigilance (intensely watching for more distressing events) or flashbacks (sensing that the event is reoccurring). Fear could also be a response, including the fear that a loved one will be hurt or killed.

It is believed that more direct exposures to traumatic events causes greater harm. For instance, in a school shooting an injured student will probably be more severely affected emotionally than a student who was in another part of the building. However, second-hand exposure to violence can also be traumatic. This includes seeing or hearing about violence through news stories or newspaper photographs.

Helping Young Trauma Survivors

Helping children affected by tragedy begins at the scene of the event. Most children recover within a few weeks, although some will need help for longer periods of time. Grief (a deep emotional response to loss) may take months or years to resolve. Grief may be re-experienced or worsened by news reports or the event's anniversary.

Some children may need help from a mental health professional, while others may turn to religious leaders, community leaders, teachers, other adults and friends for assistance.

The first step in helping those affected by trauma is to identify the children who need assistance. The following may be signs that a child has been affected by trauma or a violent act:

- The child refuses to go places that remind them of the event
- The child seems emotionally numb
- The child shows little reaction to the event
- The child starts to behave dangerously or erratically

To help children cope with trauma, adults should:

- Attend to children
- Listen to what children say
- Accept/do not argue about their feelings
- Help them cope with the reality of their experiences
- Reduce effects of other potential sources of stress in their life
- Monitor the healing process over time
- Immediately address severe reactions to the experience
- Attend to sudden changes in behaviors, speech, language use and emotions
- Remind children that adults love and support them

How Parents and Family Can Help

After violence or a disaster parents and family should:

- Identify and address their personal feelings
- Explain to children what happened
- Let children know that you love them, that the event was not their fault, that you will take care of them (but only if you can; be honest) and that it is okay for them to feel upset
- Allow children to cry and feel sadness
- Let children talk about feelings
- Let them write about feelings
- Let them draw pictures

Parents and other adults should not:

- Expect children to be brave or tough
- Make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Get angry if children show strong emotions
- Get upset if children begin bed-wetting, acting out or thumb-sucking
- Make promises they cannot keep

If children have trouble sleeping give them extra attention, let them sleep with a light on or let them sleep in your room (for a short time).

Try to keep normal routines for activities like going to sleep, eating dinner, watching TV, reading books, exercising and playing games. If you cannot keep old routines try to make new ones together.

Help children feel in control. Ways to do this include letting them choose meals, pick out their own clothes and letting them make decisions for themselves whenever possible.

How Children May React to Trauma

Children's reactions to trauma can occur immediately after the event or appear much later. Reactions can differ in severity and cover a range of behaviors. People from different cultures may have their own ways of reacting.

One common response is loss of trust. Another is fear of the traumatic event occurring again. Some children are more vulnerable to trauma's effects. Children with existing mental health problems or who have experienced other traumatic events may be more affected than others.

Children under five years of age may react in a number of ways to traumatic events:

- Facial expressions of fear
- Clinging to parent or caregiver
- Crying or screaming
- Whimpering or trembling
- Moving aimlessly
- Becoming immobile
- Returning to behaviors like thumb-sucking, bed-wetting and being afraid of the dark

Children between six and 11 have a range of reactions to trauma. They may:

- Isolate themselves from friends and family
- Become quiet around friends, family and teachers
- Have nightmares or other sleep problems
- Become irritable or disruptive
- Have outbursts of anger
- Start fights
- Be unable to concentrate
- Refuse to go to school
- Complain of unfounded physical problems
- Develop unfounded fears
- Become depressed
- Become filled with guilt
- Feel emotionally numb
- Perform poorly in school and on homework

Children between 12 and 17 have various reactions to trauma, including:

- Flashbacks to the traumatic event (flashbacks are the mind reliving the event)
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Drug, alcohol and tobacco use and abuse
- Antisocial behaviors including being disruptive, disrespectful and destructive
- Physical complaints
- Nightmares or other sleep problems
- Isolation or confusion
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts

Adolescents may feel guilty about the event for not preventing injury or deaths. They may also have thoughts of revenge.

Contacting a Mental Health Professional

Some children will experience prolonged problems after a traumatic event. These may include grief, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many trauma survivors will need counselling from a mental health professional to help them deal with their problems.

You should contact a mental health professional if, after a month in a safe environment, children are not able to perform normal routines or they start to develop new symptoms. Also, some symptoms may require immediate attention. Contact a mental health professional if these symptoms occur:

- Flashbacks
- Racing heart and sweating
- Being easily startled
- Being emotionally numb
- Being very sad or depressed
- Thoughts or actions concerning suicide or the death of others