

Parent Tips for Helping Children Handle Tragic Events

KEY IDEAS

- Children sense the anxiety and tension in adults around them.
- Each child responds differently to tragic events, depending on his or her experiences, understanding, age, and maturity.
- Children will interpret the tragic event as a personal danger to themselves and those they care about.
- Your child needs to talk about his or her feelings

SIGNS OF STRESS

Parents should be alert to these changes in a child's behavior now or in the future

- Persistent fears related to the incidents (such as fears about being hurt or permanently separated from their parents).
- Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, or bedwetting which persist more than several days after the event.
- Loss of concentration and irritability.
- Change in activity level.
- Behavior problems, such as misbehaving at school or home in ways that are not typical of the child.
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness).
- Withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, or inactivity.
- Preoccupation with the events of the incident.

AGE APPROPRIATE SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW PARENTS CAN TALK TO THEIR CHILDREN AT HOME

- Children need comforting and frequent reassurance that they're safe.
- Be Honest and open about the tragic event, but keep information age-appropriate.
- Encourage children to express their feelings through talking, drawing, or playing.
- Try to maintain your daily routines as much as possible.

TIPS FOR HELPING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

These suggestions are offered as essential guidelines to use during times of crisis in the lives of children and teenagers. (Healing Magazine, Therapist's Corner, Spring 2002)

CHILDREN SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO:

- Talk. Talking to trusted adults is strongly encouraged, not only to express concerns and fears, but also to get answers that were accurate from those they trust.
- Express their feelings. Helping children verbalize and understand their safety concerns should normalize what are often powerful and frightening reactions to traumatic events.
- Limit television. Children and even young teens are advised to limit repeated exposure to graphic media images of the events. Continued exposure increases the likelihood of adverse reactions both short and long-term.
- Get involved. Offer children ways of helping or getting involved in the efforts of their community. Give children the message that being young does not prevent them from helping others.
- Get back to things they like. Children are encouraged to continue doing things that are fun, enjoyable, and routine as soon as possible. Routine activities are powerful in helping to reduce anxiety and fear.
- Be on the lookout for warning signs. Children are encouraged to be aware of headaches, stomachaches, nightmares, feeling sad, trouble sleeping or eating, increased arguing with family or friends, school refusal, trouble concentrating, or not wanting to be alone (for younger children). Behavioral and somatic complaints are characteristic of excessive worry, anxiety, and depression.

PARENTS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO:

- Listen carefully to what children are saying. Giving children answers to their questions while letting them know their parents care about them is essential, especially during times of crisis.
- Provide their children with answers that are age-appropriate and easily understood.
- Reassure their children of their safety. While not telling children it can never happen to them, parents should let them know it is very unlikely and that there are people to protect

them. It is likely that children will need to be assured of this many times over the weeks or months following the trauma.

- Limit continued viewing of graphics violence associated with the event.
- Remember that teens get scared too. Parent should not forget that even teens need to be reassured that they are safe.
- Take care of themselves. Parents were encouraged to watch themselves for the same behavior and somatic complaints listed above.
- Be open to professional consultation, if necessary. Parents are urged to seek professional advice from their family physician or mental health professional if symptoms appear and remain for more than two weeks.

WHAT CAN I DO AS A PARENT?

As a surviving parent, there are several things that can be done to support the grieving child.

- Explain the death in a clear and direct manner. If the remaining parent cannot do this, then the child should be informed by another adult who is close to the child.
- The child should be told the dead person will never return and that the body will be buried in the ground or burned to ashes.
- The remaining parent should not deny the child an opportunity to share in the expression of pain.
- Adults should avoid using children as confidants for their own comfort and understanding.
- The single most important message to relay to the child is, “You are not alone; I am with you.”
- Touching and holding a child can do more than any words to relay a parent’s message.
- Children should be allowed to attend the funeral, if it is their wish.
- Prior to the funeral someone should explain to the children what is likely to take place, who will be there, and how people are likely to react.
- The choice of whether to view or touch the deceased should be left up to the child.
- It is important to establish continuity in the daily routines of children.
- Changing to a new school or moving to a new neighborhood should be postponed.

- If it is determined that a child is experiencing pathological grief, rather than grief reactions, counseling may be necessary in order to help facilitate the grieving process.

CHILDREN NEED THE STRUCTURE OF FAMILY SUPPORT

When someone dies, parents may forget that this may be the first death their child has ever experienced. There are many new issues, adjustments, and events for which children need firm structure. Consider the following very partial list of what children may encounter for the first time:

Understanding the concept of death

- Experiencing family members' grief reactions
- Sensing the inability to bring a loved one back
- Seeing their first dead person
- Seeing a dead relative for the last time
- Experiencing hopelessness
- Wondering why people are put in the ground or crypt or cremated
- Recalling, as time proceeds, all the automatic reactions of the dead loved one
- Feeling a strong sense of emptiness