

TRAUMA AND YOUR FAMILY

JULY 2015 RESOURCE SHARING

By understanding how children experience traumatic events and how these children express their lingering distress over the experience, parents, physicians, communities, and schools can respond to their children and help them through this challenging time. The goal is to restore balance to these children's lives and the lives of their families.

How Children May React

How children experience traumatic events and how they express their lingering distress depends, in large part, on the children's age and level of development.

Preschool and young school-age children exposed to a traumatic event may experience a feeling of helplessness, uncertainty about whether there is continued danger, a general fear that extends beyond the traumatic event and into other aspects of their lives, and difficulty describing in words what is bothering them or what they are experiencing emotionally.

This feeling of helplessness and anxiety is often expressed as a loss of previously acquired developmental skills, such as losing some speech and toileting skills, or sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors, or fear of going to sleep.

For school-age children, a traumatic experience may elicit feelings of persistent concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family. These children may be preoccupied with their own actions during the event. Often they experience guilt or shame over what they did or did not do during a traumatic event. School-age children might engage in constant retelling of the traumatic event, or they may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness.

Adolescents exposed to a traumatic event feel self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event. Feelings of fear, vulnerability, and concern over being labeled "abnormal" or different from their peers may cause adolescents to withdraw from family and friends. Adolescents often experience feelings of shame and guilt about the traumatic event and may express fantasies about revenge and retribution. A traumatic event for adolescents may foster a radical shift in the way these children think about the world. Some adolescents engage in self-destructive or accident-prone behaviors.

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Helping Kids Cope with Traumatic Events

Age appropriate—Provide information that is appropriate for the child’s age. Children do not need all the graphic details. Young children do not need long explanations, while older children may benefit from learning about the historical background of the problems.

Be a good listener—Be available to listen to your children. Do not dismiss their concerns, but try to understand them.

Control your responses—Remain calm. Children take their emotional cues from the adults around them.

Delete (inappropriate) television—Repeated viewing of tragic events can traumatize children over and over. Also, children do not need to hear the endless speculation that is part of most news programs.

Express love—Also, express goodness; express faith. Simple acts of kindness reassures children that goodness still exists.

Focus on the helpers—Emphasizing the role of helpers lets children see that there are many brave and caring people in the world.

Get back to family routines—Routines reassure children that their world is all right. Pay special attention to bedtime routines.

Hugs—Provide physical reassurance.

Intense emotions—Expect intense feelings that may come and go. We can model for children how to handle emotions constructively.

Jokes—Some children, particularly teens, may use humor as a way to cope. Within reason, be accepting of this.

Know your resources—Feel free to consult friends, grandparents, doctors, school counselors as needed.

Love—Tell your children “I love you.” Tell them often.

Monitor children’s play—Children express emotions through play. **Notice what your child needs**—Be prepared to give your child extra time and attention during difficult periods.

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Observe your children—Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Watch for changes in behavior, appetite and sleep patterns.

Pray as a family—Use this opportunity to draw closer spiritually as a family.

Questions—Answer questions directly, but don't give them more information than they are asking for, or more than they need.

Reassure—If you're faced with a question you can't answer, remember the most important thing you can do is reassure your children that you will do everything possible to keep them safe.

Stick to the facts—Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened or what might happen in the future. This will only escalate children's fears.

Take your cues from your child—Young children are remarkably resilient. Don't assume they are more afraid than they actually are. Conversely, don't assume that they are unaware of what has happened.

Understand reactions to trauma—Reactions to traumatic events may appear immediately after the event or they may surface weeks or months later.

Vulnerable—Children who have already gone through other stressful events are more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress symptoms.

When to seek outside help—If your child seems overly worried and has difficulty with normal routines (school, sleep, being away from a parent temporarily) consider talking with a doctor, psychologist, or school counselor.

X-tra patience—You and your children will likely be more weary and irritable. Be extra patient.

You can make a difference—Consider how your family can help. Children can regain their sense of security if they feel they can help in some way.

Zzzzz—Prolonged stress suppresses the immune system, leading to greater susceptibility to illness. Make sure you and your children get plenty of rest. Make time to exercise and remember to eat well.