

Talking About Traumatic Events

Helping Children Cope

Whether it is a violent crime or a natural disaster, talking with children about traumatic events can be difficult.

Children are likely to know when something bad has happened. Children see images on TV or hear people talking. Traumatic events can make children feel sad or scared. Talking with them about their feelings can help. Look below for tips to get you started.

Create a safe and reassuring atmosphere.

- ✓ When children are aware that something bad has happened, let them know they can talk to you about their feelings.
- ✓ Asking them about what they have heard is a good way to start.
- ✓ Children may be fearful that such things could happen to them or their families. Reassure them that you will keep them as safe as possible.

Children need you to tell the truth.

- ✓ Answer their questions with honesty.
- ✓ Explain events using words and ideas that they understand.
- ✓ Don't overwhelm them with details unless they ask for specific information.
- ✓ It's OK to let children know that you too are feeling sad or anxious because of events.

Help them cope with their feelings.

- ✓ If it is hard for your children to talk about their feelings, encourage them to draw pictures, tell stories, or play with toys to express themselves and to find comfort.
- ✓ During stressful times, stick to your child's regular routine. Children find comfort in what is familiar.
- ✓ Doing something for the people affected by a tragedy can help children feel better. Suggest they draw a card to send, or participate in a fundraising effort.
- ✓ Focus on the positive. Point out all the people who help others during an emergency.



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How can you deal with TV, Internet and other media?

- ✓ Monitor younger children's TV and online viewing. Make sure they don't watch shows or visit sites with disturbing images.
- ✓ For older children or adolescents, watching TV or online news or reading the newspaper may be appropriate. Be sure to talk about what they see and hear.
- ✓ Ask questions like, "What do you think about what is happening? Are you scared? Do you feel sad or angry?"

Look for signs of anxiety or fear.

- ✓ Watch for:
 - ❑ Loss of appetite, stomachaches, headaches or nightmares.
 - ❑ Constantly talking about scary ideas or feelings.
 - ❑ Fear or anger toward specific ethnic groups or communities.
 - ❑ Increased fighting with friends, parents or siblings.
 - ❑ Fear of leaving parents, or going to school.
- ✓ If your child shows any of these signs for a long period of time, consider talking with a health care professional.



If a loved one is involved in a tragedy...

- ✓ Spend extra time together. Knowing you are there for support can help children feel more secure.
- ✓ Join or start a family support group with other families who have loved ones involved in a crisis. Children can benefit from others who are going through similar things.
- ✓ Children who have lost a family member or loved one need extra love and reassurance. Encourage them to share their feelings. Remind them that you are there for them during this difficult time.
- ✓ Consider crisis or family counseling to help you and your children.

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It's tough to talk with kids about violence, disasters and other traumatic events. But you can help your child understand what is happening and cope with his or her feelings. To get more information, talk with your family health care provider.

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