

## Tips For Helping Your Child Through A Traumatic Event

Children do not have the ability to communicate worries or concerns through words. They just don't have the vocabulary. Teens have the vocabulary. However they may lack the maturity and life experience to properly identify the feelings that they are having. Both children and teens are impacted by the influences that surround them.

For a parent or guardian, a traumatic event is frightening. It can be even more frightening and unsettling for children. Like the adults around them, they too experienced the same event. The children in your life have also been exposed to the same photographs, stories in print media and television images.

Children are like sponges, taking in the world. They are very aware when the adults around them are having a strong emotional reaction.

Children need to have their feelings validated. It is important to remember that a child not talking about an event does not mean that the event is forgotten or has no importance. Children and teens are more likely to express their reactions through their actions rather than words. It is important to be attentive and take special care through this time of chaos and instability.

The children in your life need your reassurance that they are safe with you. It is important to let them know that it is healthy to express emotions and to let them out. During this time, children will likely be highly sensitive and attentive to the adult responses surrounding them.

The children in your care will need reassurance that their safety and security will be taken care of by the adults in their lives. They will need encouragement to express their concerns. An extra hug, extra talk time or an extra five minutes before bedtime are some examples of what you can do to encourage and reassure them. Let them tell you what they need by paying attention to what they are doing or asking for.

Here are some potential reactions that you might see in your child:

- Irritability, agitation, confusion
- Withdrawn, denial, sadness
- Sleep disturbance, nightmares
- Increased anxiety, intense fear
- Changes in appetite
- Distress due to work or travel related parental absence
- Testing house rules-dress, curfew, chores
- Quietness, less communicative
- Feelings of helplessness or anger
- More prone to accidents/clumsiness
- Verbal outbursts
- Poor concentration
- Return/increase of bed-wetting or other regressive behaviour

The reactions are usually temporary and will often subside in three to six weeks. In the meantime though, these reactions can be uncomfortable, impacting concentration, productivity and even disrupting sleep patterns.

## What Can You Do?

- Don't leave your child alone in a new place
- Talk to your child about the disaster
- Encourage your child to talk
- Say it is OK to be afraid
- Tell your child about your plans each day
- Put order in your day as best you can
- Be attentive to media coverage adding to you and your child's anxiety/stress level
- Stay together to show you won't go away
- Hold and hug
- Listen
- Let your children know that you were afraid too.
- Reassure your child that they are in a safe place
- As long as it can be done safely, let your child help clean up
- Explain. Talk. Listen. Over and over again

Bedtime may be difficult. Your child may be afraid of the dark, not want to sleep away from you and/or may have nightmares or begin to wet the bed again.

## What You Can Do At Bedtime

- Explain why it gets dark
- Praise the child for good things
- Leave the door open a little. Leave the light on
- Read to your child
- Tell a story about something good that happened that day
- Talk about dreams
- Don't yell
- Agree on a time for your child to go to bed

It is important to help your child externalize the feelings. Keeping reactions inside will only serve to have them go into hiding and come back when least expected.

Speak with other parents, caregivers, your child's teacher or school principal to discuss other ideas and suggestions, support and resources.

Be aware of your own stress reactions in order to take care of yourself. Your emotional health is an essential element to providing appropriate support to your children. Here's a quick guide to "normal responses".

If you are experiencing a number of these reactions don't just push them away. Make sure that you find support for yourself. Remember reactions will come back.

## Normal Reactions To Stress

### Physical:

- Profuse sweating/night sweats
- Stomach upset
- Nightmares
- Overall sense of fatigue
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Disruption in normal sexual functioning
- Disruption in menstrual cycle

### Cognitive:

- Problems concentrating
- Short term memory problems (forgetting where you put your keys etc.)
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor attention span
- Flashbacks to the incident

**Emotional:**

- Sadness
- Guilt
- Feelings “if only”
- Anxiety
- Irritability/anger
- Grief
- Fear of repetition of the event
- Feeling disconnected/ emotionally numb

**How Do I Deal With These Responses?**

- Get Rest
- Talk, talk, talk
- Eat well
- Drink lots of water/avoid alcohol
- Keep a normal schedule
- Take a walk or run
- If you wake up in the middle of the night have a drink of water, read a little if you can't get back to sleep and remember to take some deep breaths.
- If having a flashback take some good deep breaths breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth to the count of ten and take notice of your current environment

**Connect to the people and resources that can make a difference in your life.  
Call your Employee and Family Assistance Program 24 hours a day seven days a  
week at: 1 800 461.5888**