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Parent tips for helping your children after a traumatic event.



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I. Initiate the conversation

Just because children aren't talking about a tragedy doesn't mean they're not thinking about it, experts say. They may sense your discomfort and not want to upset you by bringing it up, or they may be too overwhelmed by their own feelings to express them.

"Without factual information, children (and adults) 'speculate' and fill in the empty spaces to make a complete story or explanation," explains psychiatrist Bruce D. Perry in a guide for the nonprofit ChildTrauma Academy on "Helping Traumatized Children." "In most cases, the child's fears and fantasies are much more frightening and disturbing than the truth." As soon as the child asks questions or seems to be thinking about the event, it's time to have a conversation, Perry advises.

Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), in a guide called "Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World," suggests that children as young as four or five can benefit from talking about the event. To open up the conversation, you might start with questions like these:

"How do you feel about what's happening in the world?"

"What are you or your friends thinking and talking about in terms of the world situation?"

2. Reassure them

Tragedy can rattle our sense of safety, and our children's.

One goal of this conversation is to provide them with the reassurance that:

- Things will get better.
- You will be there for them.
- They can ask you questions anytime.
- They are safe, and so are the people they care about.

To make your reassurances more believable, you can point out some of the safety measures that are being taken, like explaining what security guards do. "Children need to hear very clearly that their parents are doing all they can to take care of them and to keep them safe. They also need to hear that people in the government and other grownups they don't even know are working hard to keep them safe, too," reads a quote from Fred "Mister" Rogers on his website, which contains a section dedicated to helping children after tragic events.

3. Listen

Although we always want to be good listeners for our children, it's especially crucial in the wake of traumatic events. That means giving them our full attention, and not jumping to judge or minimize what they're saying—no matter how silly or illogical it may seem. For example, if a child is afraid that every plane overhead carries a bomb, it might be better to say, "I understand why you're scared, but actually..." instead of stuttering out a horrified "No, of course not!"

"By your ability to listen calmly, even to concerns which might seem unrealistic, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with," the ESR guide explains.

If children's fears sound vague or jumbled, parents can help by gently summarizing what they're hearing: "It sounds like what you're feeling is..." A few clarifying questions can also help:

"That's interesting, can you tell me more about that?"

"What do you mean by...?"

"How long have you been feeling...?"

4. Find out what they know

By listening, parents can discover the snippets and rumors that their children have already absorbed about a tragedy. If it's unclear, a simple "What have you heard about this?" should do the trick.

A key purpose of this conversation is to correct any misconceptions children may have picked up while at the same time offering more concrete information. You can tailor the level of detail depending on their age and how many unanswered questions are weighing on their minds.

Some of those questions may be tricky to answer—and in that case, ESR suggests responses like these:

"I don't know the answer to that and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many thoughtful people throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

"That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. How can we find that out together?"

"The process of figuring out where to get the information, and going through the steps to obtain it, can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them," the guide explains. "In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding."

5. Encourage children to share their feelings

Sadness, anxiety, fear, stress, even excitement—all feelings are possible in response to tragedy and violence. Whatever children are feeling, Mister Rogers encouraged parents to show understanding and acceptance:

"If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may think something is wrong with them when they do feel that way," he said. "If we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them."

We might even encourage children to express their feelings in a non-verbal way, through drawing, writing, singing, or play.

6. Share your feelings

Experts seem to agree that sharing your feelings with your child can be beneficial, with some caveats.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, TOO

If you're feeling overwhelmed or traumatized by the event, try these resilience-building practices:

Mindful Breathing: Spend 15 minutes meditating while focusing on your breath.

Expressive Writing: Write continuously for 20 minutes about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the event, and how it relates to your past.

First, you want to communicate that you can handle whatever it is you're feeling. "[Children] get a chance to see that even though upset, you can pull yourself together and continue on. Parents hear it often: Be a role model. This applies to emotions, too," explain the experts at the American Psychological Association in their guide on how to talk to children about difficult news and tragedies. (If your anger or worries threaten to overwhelm you or distract you from your child, you might not be ready to have this conversation yet.)

Another risk is that your feelings might add to or replace the ones children are already experiencing.

"A serious pitfall is that we might burden them with our adult concerns, raising new questions and fears for them, rather than helping them deal with questions and fears they already have," explains the ESR guide. "We might simply find ourselves talking over their heads, answering questions that weren't asked, providing information that isn't useful, satisfying our need to 'give' children something rather than satisfying their need to be heard and understood."

As a result, ESR suggests limited expressions of emotion, such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I feel sad, too." This approach avoids the pitfalls mentioned above while demonstrating acceptance, showing empathy, and not denying what you're feeling.

7. Focus on the good

Where there is tragedy, there is also heroism—acts by police officers, doctors, or ordinary citizens that restore our faith in humanity right when it is shaken. The forces of good spring into action with their love, support, and generosity. In Paris, for example, many restaurant and shop owners opened their doors and sheltered pedestrians as the attacks were going on and through the night.

A quote from Mister Rogers is often cited after tragedies to make this point beautifully:

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”

Entire systems exist for this very purpose, such as the Red Cross or the study of earthquake-proof architecture. The University of Michigan Health System encourages parents to use tragedy as an opportunity to educate kids on all the ways people are working to keep us safe. The message is: There are good people all around you.

8. Encourage children to act

When we feel the pain of others, compassion motivates us to help and to transform that pain into a feeling of connection and support. Encouraging kids to do something about what they’re feeling can give them an outlet and restore their sense of control.

Some suggestions might include:

Writing letters to victims and their families.

Sending thank you notes to doctors, paramedics, firefighters, or police.

Setting up a community study group to learn more about the issue.

Organizing a town meeting to create an action plan.

Writing a letter to the editor.

Raising money for charity.

“You can help children find a way to step out of their position of powerlessness. You can tell them honestly that their concerns are quite healthy because people’s concern is the first step toward doing something to make the world safer,” explains the ESR guide.

9. Know when to seek outside help

What does a “normal” reaction to tragedy look like?

There may be no normal, but experts seem to agree that if more than three months have passed and your child is still suffering—from anxiety, distraction, fear, hopelessness, sleep problems, nightmares, sadness, angry outbursts, or headaches—it might be time to consult a mental health professional. Every child is different, and how they react will depend on factors such as how close to home the tragedy was, whether they were traumatized in the past, and their general level of mental health.

When immediate outside help is needed, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is always available; 800-273-8255 (Press 2 for Spanish)

The following resources, which informed this document, can help parents and educators who are guiding children through trauma recovery:

Educators for Social Responsibility has created an excellent guide, “Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World,” that addresses 32 questions about how to broach the subject with students and respond to their concerns.

The ChildTrauma Academy’s “Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers,” written by noted psychiatrist Bruce D. Perry, provides answers to frequently asked questions about children and trauma and even features trauma-related drawings by children.

In his career as a child educator, Fred “Mister” Rogers consistently devoted special attention to helping kids cope with scary and even traumatic events. His company has compiled some of his most enduring tips and insights.

The American Psychological Association provides tips to help children “manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting.”

The University of Michigan Health System’s “Helping Your Children Cope with Disasters and Traumatic Events” includes helpful ways to find the positives and take action.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and its tips for “Talking to Children about the Shooting” can shed light on how children make sense of traumatic events, and how to respond to their questions and fears.

The NCTSN also has a Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators that explains how school administrators, teachers, and other staff can work with traumatized children in the school system.

The Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland’s School of Medicine offers many resources for dealing with traumatic events in schools, including resources for parents and caregivers.

The National Association for School Psychologists has a handout to help children cope with tragedy called “Helping Children Cope with Terrorism—Tips for Families and Educators,” including tips for parents, teachers, and schools.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration offers “Tips for Talking with and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event,” including how children of different ages tend to react and how to best respond to them.

The National Institute of Mental Health’s “Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Parents Can Do” includes do’s and don’ts for talking to children about trauma, as well as tips for interacting with people directly affected by the tragedy.

The State of Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families offers step-by-step tips on “Talking with Children and Adolescents After a Traumatic Event,” including appropriate responses for children of different ages.

The State of Victoria, Australia’s “Trauma and Children—Tips For Parents” explains how children might react to trauma, what their needs are, and how to support them.

Kids Matter, a mental health initiative for young children in Australia, offers a guide called “Managing Tough Times: Suggestions for Families and Staff” with helpful activities for children (and for yourself) after trauma.

The American Red Cross explains how to create a healing family environment and when to seek professional help in “Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma.”