

Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event

Overview

Ways to help children cope after traumatic events they have heard about or experienced directly.

- Understanding your child's fears
- The importance of security and routines
- Helping your child
- Common reactions
- If your child's fears continue

Children of all ages may have strong reactions to traumatic events such as fires, plane crashes, and school shootings or other violent crimes. Even children who are generally happy and well-adjusted may find such tragedies confusing or frightening, whether they have been directly involved or have heard about them from their friends or the media.

Because traumatic events are part of life, you can't protect children from ever hearing about them. But you can take steps to help them manage their feelings about them. These steps include understanding their fears, offering reassurance, and providing routines that will help them feel loved and secure.

Understanding your child's fears

After a traumatic event, children may have many of the same fears that adults do. They may be afraid that the event will happen again, that they or their family will be hurt, or that they will be separated from people they love.

Children may also have fears based on mistaken ideas about what happened. For example, many young children have trouble telling the difference between fantasy and reality. So even if they hear that firefighters put out a serious fire, they may think that it could start up again. Or they may believe that an event that occurred long ago or far away actually happened recently and close to home.

The importance of security and routines

Children always benefit from having a strong sense of security that includes predictable routines. These routines are especially important after a traumatic event, when you'll need to do as much as you can to reduce disruptions and reassure your child that he is loved, cared for, and protected. It's a good idea to do the following:

- *Reassure your child that you are there to protect her*, and that your family is safe.
- *Provide extra physical reassurance.* Hugging, sitting close to read a book, and giving backrubs can help restore a child's sense of safety.
- *Give your child a comforting toy or something of yours to keep* -- a scarf, a photograph, or a note from you. Your child may be afraid of separating from you, and keeping a reminder of you close by can help.

2 • Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event

- *Be available as much as you can* for talking with and comforting your child. (If you can, you may want to save phone calls for after your child's bedtime.)
- *If your child's daily routine has been interrupted*, let him know that this is only temporary. (You will probably need to repeat this many times to a preschooler or other young child.)

Helping your child

You can comfort and reassure your child by communicating openly and sensitively about what happened.

- *Ask your child what she thinks has happened*. If she has any misconceptions, this is a chance for you to help her. If a child knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with her about her fears.
- *Help your child talk about the event by letting him know that it is normal to feel worried or upset*. Try to listen carefully and understand what he really wants to say. Help younger children use words like "angry" and "sad" for their feelings.
- *Be aware of your own reaction to a traumatic event*. Younger children may be unsettled by a parent's strong reaction to a traumatic event. Remember that children often pick up on nonverbal behavior, so even if you're not talking about your concerns your child may realize that you're upset.
- *Be patient when your child asks the same question many times*. Asking the same question over and over is one way that children "test" what they have heard to find out if it's really true. For this reason, they often find repetition very comforting. Try to be consistent with answers and information.
- *If your child seems reluctant to talk, ask her to draw pictures of what happened*, and talk about the pictures with her. Drawing pictures can be a good way to help children express feelings that are hard to describe.
- *Encourage a young child to act out his feelings with toys or puppets*. Don't be alarmed if he expresses angry or violent emotions. Instead, use the play-acting to begin a conversation about his worries and fears.
- *Be honest about your own feelings*, but talk with other adults if you feel very anxious and afraid of how you'll cope. Children pick up on their parents' emotions and may feel frightened and helpless if they think that adults are.
- *Consider your child's age, maturity, and development in making decisions about media exposure*. It's generally best to shield very young children from graphic details and pictures in the media because they may not understand these and feel more afraid if they see them. Take the overall maturity and development of other children into account in deciding what they should see. Consider such things as whether your child is easily upset or frightened and how she's reacted in the past to news reports of troubling events.

3 • Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event

- *Watch the news with older children.* In most families, it isn't realistic to try to shield older children and teenagers from the news. Even if you turn off the television, they may hear the news from friends or read about it on the Internet. It's usually more practical to watch the news with them, talk about what you see, and reassure them that you will protect them. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) (www.aacap.org) recommends that you "make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to the child." The AACAP also advises that you monitor the amount of time your child spends watching the news and be alert for signs that media reports may have triggered fears or behavior such as sleeplessness.

Common reactions

Here are some common reactions associated with traumatic events and ways to help your child deal with them:

- *Regressing.* Many children may try to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer and more cared for. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone or start using "baby talk." It's important to be patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- *Thinking the event is their fault.* Children younger than 7 or 8 tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault -- no matter how irrational this may sound to an adult. Tell your child he did not cause an upsetting event.
- *Developing sleep disorders.* Some children have difficulty going to sleep while others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If you can, give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again. You may find that reading a book designed to help children feel more comfortable at night, such as *There's a Monster Under My Bed* by James Howe, may be helpful.
- *Feeling helpless.* Powerlessness is painful for both adults and children. You and your family may feel more hope and control if you take steps to help people who have suffered because of an event -- for example, by taking up a collection, organizing a fund-raiser, or donating helpful items to a family that needs them after a trauma. You might also get involved in a campaign to prevent such tragedies from happening again. If the tragedy affected you directly, write thank-you notes to people who helped. It will help your child to see you model appropriate levels of anxiety when possible.

If your child's fears continue

Sometimes a child's fears last long after a traumatic event, interfering with her enjoyment of everyday life, and she may need professional help to feel better.

4 • Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event

Talk with a doctor if your child exhibits the following symptoms that don't go away after a number of weeks:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- bedwetting (that was not seen previously)
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- thumb sucking, nail biting (that was not seen previously)
- unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness
- unusual agitation or aggression
- excessive clinging

The program that provided this publication can give you more information on how to help your child cope after a traumatic event or can help you find a professional who can provide emotional support at a difficult time.

Written with the help of Sally L. Flagler, Ph.D. Dr. Flagler is a licensed pediatric psychologist and a certified school psychologist with preschool and autistic programs in North Carolina. Her advanced training is in neuropsychology. She has written extensively about early childhood and autism and has taught both in regular education settings, and at the university and medical school levels. She is the coordinator of the National Association of School Psychologists' Early Childhood Interest Group.

© 1997, 2007 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.

This article is an example of the information offered through Ceridian's work-life and EAP services. Ceridian is making the article available as a public service. It may be copied and distributed to anyone affected by a large-scale tragedy.

080707