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Dear Parents and Teachers,

In the wake of a traumatic event, you may be filled with worry or sadness. Yet no matter how concerned or overwhelmed you may feel, as parents and teachers you have the power to help children recover. Your comfort, support and reassurance can make them feel safe and secure, guide them through their fears and grief, and prevent them from suffering lasting psychological effects.

This guide was assembled by psychiatrists, psychologists and mental health experts who specialize in crisis situations. It offers simple tips on what to expect, what to do and what to look out for. There are general suggestions as well as age-specific information. If you or your children

Helpful Tips for Children of Any Age

Make your child feel safe. All children, from toddlers to teens, will benefit from your touch — extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. It gives them a feeling of security, which is so important in the aftermath of a frightening or disturbing event. For specific information on what to do and say, see the Age-by-Age Guide.

Act calm. Children look to adults for reassurance after traumatic events have occurred. Do not discuss your anxieties with your children, or when they are around, and be aware of the tone of your voice, as children quickly pick up on anxiety.

Maintain routines as much as possible. Amidst chaos and change, routines reassure children that life will be okay again. Try to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or temporarily relocated, establish new routines. And stick with the same family rules, such as ones about good behavior.

Help children enjoy themselves. Encourage kids to do activities and play with others. The distraction is good for them, and gives them a sense of normalcy.

Share information about what happened. It's always best to learn the details of a traumatic event from a safe, trusted adult. Be brief and honest, and allow children to ask questions. Don't presume kids are worrying about the same things as adults.

Pick good times to talk. Look for natural openings to have a discussion.

Prevent or limit exposure to news coverage. This is especially critical with toddlers and school-age children, as seeing disturbing events recounted on television or in the newspaper or listening to them on the radio can make them seem to be ongoing. Children who believe bad events are temporary can more quickly recover from them.

Understand that children cope in different ways. Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Let your child know it is normal to experience

- Constantly replaying the event in their minds
- Nightmares
- Beliefs that the world is generally unsafe
- Irritability, anger and moodiness
- Poor concentration
- Appetite or sleep issues
- Behavior problems
- Nervousness about people getting too close
- Jumpiness from loud noises

Help children relax with breathing exercises. Breathing becomes shallow when anxiety sets in; deep belly breaths can help children calm down. You can hold a feather or a wad of cotton in front of your child's mouth and ask him to b.1 (eaths can help childr)5 (en calm)0 (t it,)1016(en x)5 (ensm)0 (IC en . OrMC P 4 (asaC

How to Help Children Ages 0-2

Infants sense your emotions, and react accordingly. If you are calm, your baby will feel secure. If you act anxious and overwhelmed, your baby may react with fussing, have trouble being soothed, eat or sleep irregularly or act withdrawn.



Try your best to act calm. Even if you are feeling stressed or anxious, talk to your baby in a soothing voice.

Respond consistently to your baby's needs.

Watch what you say. Little children have big ears and may pick up on your anxiety, misinterpret what they hear or be frightened unnecessarily by things they do not understand.

Maintain routines as much as possible. No matter what your living situation, do your best to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or have been relocated, create new routines. Try to do the things you have always done with your children, such as singing songs or saying prayers before they go to sleep.

Give extra support at bedtime. Children who have been through trauma may become anxious at night. When you put your child to bed, spend more time than usual talking or telling stories. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.

Do not expose kids to the news. Young children tend to confuse facts with fears. They may not realize that the images they see on the news aren't happening again and again. They should also not listen to the radio.

Encourage children to share feelings. Try a simple question such as, "How are you feeling today?" Follow any conversations about the recent event with a favorite story or a family activity to help kids feel more safe and calm.

Enable your child to tell the story of what happened. This will help her make sense of the event and cope with her feelings. Play can often be used to help your child frame the story and tell you about the event in her own words.

Draw pictures. Young children often do well expressing emotions with drawing. This is another opportunity to provide explanations and reassurance. To start a discussion, you may comment on what a child has drawn.

If your child acts out it may be a sign she needs extra attention. Help her name how she feels: Scared? Angry? Sad? Let her know it is okay to feel that way, then show her the right way to behave — you can say, "It's okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit your sister."



- Talking repeatedly about the event or pretending to "play" the event
- Tantrums or irritable outbursts
- Crying and tearfulness
- Increased fearfulness — often of the dark, monsters or being alone
- Increased sensitivity to sounds like thunder, wind and other loud noises
- Disturbances in eating, sleeping and toileting
- Believing that the disaster can be undone
- Excessive clinging to caregivers and trouble separating
- Reverting to early behavior like baby talk, bedwetting and thumb-sucking

Get kids involved in activities. Distraction is a good thing for kids at this age. Play games with them, and arrange for playtime with other kids.

Talk about things that are going well. Even in the most trying times, it's important to identify something positive and express hope for the future to help your child recover. You can say something like, "We still have each other. I am here with you, and I will stay with you." Pointing out the good will help you feel better, too.

establish different routines and give your child some choice in the matter — for example, let her choose which story to tell at bedtime. This gives a child a sense of control during an uncertain time.

Limit exposure to television, newspapers and radio. The more bad news school-age kids are exposed to, the more worried they will be. News footage can magnify the trauma of the event, so when a child does watch a news report or listen to the radio, sit with him so you can talk about it afterward. Avoid letting your child see graphic images.

Spend time talking with your child. Let him know that it is okay to ask questions and to express concerns or sadness. One way to encourage conversation is to use family time (such as mealtime) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Also ask what his friends have been saying, so you can make sure to correct any misinformation.

Answer questions briefly but honestly. After a child has brought something up, first ask for his ideas so you can understand exactly what the concern is. Usually children ask a question because they are worried about something specific. Give a reassuring answer. If you do not know an answer to a question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know.” Do not speculate or repeat rumors.

Draw out children who do not talk. Open a discussion by sharing your own feelings — for example, you could say, “This was a very scary thing, and sometimes I wake up in the night because I am thinking about it. How are you feeling?” Doing this helps your child feel he is not alone in his concerns or fears. However, do not give a lot of detail about your own anxieties.

Keep children busy. Daily activities, such as playing with friends or going to school, may have been disrupted. Help kids think of alternative activities and organize playgroups with other parents.

Calm worries about friends’ safety. Reassure your children that their friends’ parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.

Talk about community recovery. Let children know that things are being done to keep them safe, or restore electricity and water, and that government and community groups are helping, if applicable.



- Anxiety
- Increased aggression, anger and irritability (like bullying or fighting with peers)
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Blaming themselves for the event
- Moodiness or crying
- Concerns about being taken care of
- Fear of future injury or death of loved ones
- Denying the event even occurred
- Complaints about physical discomfort, such as stomach-aches, headaches and lethargy, which may be due to stress
- Repeatedly asking questions
- Refusing to discuss the event (more typical among kids ages 9-11)
- Withdrawal from social interactions
- Academic problems (like trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school)

Encourage kids to lend a hand. This will give them a sense of accomplishment and purpose at a time when they may feel helpless. Younger children can do small tasks for you; older ones can contribute to volunteer projects in the community.

Find the hope. Children need to see the future to recover. Kids this age appreciate specifics. For example, in the event of a natural disaster, you could say: "People from all over the country are sending medical supplies, food and water. They've built new places where people who are hurt will be taken care of, and they will build new homes. It'll be very hard like this for just a little while."

Be patient. Kids up to age 11 may think death is reversible, and can have trouble accepting the fact that the person may not return. You might need to say repeatedly, “He died and is not coming back, and I am sad.”

How to help children ages 12-18

Adolescence is already a challenging time for young people, who have so many changes happening in their bodies. They struggle with wanting more independence from parents, and have a tendency to believe they are invincible and nothing can harm them. Traumatic events can make them feel out of control, even if they act as if they are strong. They will also feel bad for people affected by the disaster, and have a strong desire to know why the event occurred.



Make your teen feel safe again. Adolescents do not like to show vulnerability; they may try to act as if they are doing fine even though they are not. While they may resist hugs, your touch can help them feel secure. You can say something like, “I know you’re grown now, but I just need to give you a hug.”

Help teens feel helpful. Give them small tasks and responsibilities in the household, then praise them for what they have done and how they have handled themselves. Do not overburden teens with too many responsibilities, especially adult-like ones, as that will add to their anxiety.

Open the door for discussion. It’s very typical for teens to say they don’t want to talk. Try to start a conversation while you are doing an activity together, so that the conversation does not feel too intense or confrontational.

Consider peer groups. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers, so consider organizing one. Also encourage conversation with other trusted adults, like a relative or teacher.

Limit exposure to television, newspapers and radio. While teens can handle the news better than younger kids, those who are unable to detach themselves from television or the radio may be trying to deal with anxiety

in unhealthy ways. In any case, talk with your teen about the things she has seen or heard.

Help your teen take action. Kids this age will want to help the community. Find appropriate volunteer opportunities.

Be aware of substance abuse. Teens are particularly at risk for turning to alcohol or drugs to numb their anxiety. If your teen has been behaving secretively or is seemingly drunk or high, get in touch with a doctor. And talk to your teen in a kind way. For example, "People often drink or use drugs after a disaster to calm themselves or forget, but it can also cause more problems. Some other things you can do are take a walk, talk to me or your friends about how you feel, or write about your hopes for a better future."

Be patient. Teens may have a fear of expressing emotions about death. Encourage them to talk by saying something like, "I know it is horrible that Grandma has died. Experts say it's good to share our feelings. How are you doing?"

Be very open. Discuss the ways you feel the death may be influencing her behavior.

Be flexible. It is okay, at this time, to have a little more flexibility with rules and academic and behavioral expectations.

Memorialize meaningfully. Pray together at home and include your teen in memorial ceremonies. She might also appreciate doing a private family tribute at home.



- Avoidance of feelings
- Constantly thinking about the disaster
- Distancing themselves from friends and family
- Anger or resentment
- Depression and extreme sadness
- Panic and anxiety, including worrying about the future
- Mood swings and irritability
- Changes in appetite and sleep habits
- Academic issues, such as trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school
- Participation in risky or illegal behavior, like drinking alcohol

What teachers can do to help students

Resume routine as much as possible. Children tend to function better when they know what to expect. Returning to a school routine will help students feel that the troubling events have not taken control over every aspect of their daily lives.

Maintain expectations of students. Things don't need to be perfect, but needing to do some homework and simple classroom tasks is very helpful.

Be aware of signs that a child may need extra help. Students who are unable to function due to feelings of intense sadness, fear or anger should be referred to a mental health professional. Children may have distress that is manifested as physical ailments, such as headaches, stomachaches or extreme fatigue.

Help kids understand more about what happened. For example, you can mention the various kinds of help coming in, and provide positive coping ideas.

Consider a memorial. Memorials are often helpful to commemorate people and things that were lost. School memorials should be kept brief and appropriate to the needs and age range of the general school community. Children under four may not have the attention span to join in. A known caregiver, friend or relative should be the child's companion during funeral or memorial activities.

Reassure children that school officials are making sure they are safe. Children's fears decrease when they know that trusted adults are doing what they can to take care of them.

Stay in touch with parents. Tell them about the school's programs and activities so they can be prepared for discussions that may continue at home. Encourage parents to limit their children's exposure to news reports.

Take care of yourself. You may be so busy helping your students that you neglect yourself. Find ways for you and your colleagues to support one another.

The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain, and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need