

Helping Children Deal With Traumatic News or Events

We all face difficulties at times, and sometimes it can seem that the news is full of troubling stories. Forest fires, flooding, the pandemic ... many unsettling events can affect how we feel.

- ▶ Taking care of our children’s mental health, especially during difficult times, is just as important as ensuring they have a healthy body.
- ▶ Here are some ideas that might help you and your children cope with difficult situations.

Help your children build strong, caring relationships to prepare them for challenges

- ▶ Children and youth who have strong relationships with family and friends are usually better able to deal with difficult events.
- ▶ You can help make that happen just by spending time with your children, such as eating breakfast or dinner together or doing things you all enjoy whenever you have the chance.
- ▶ More than anything else, your children will benefit from your love, attention and acceptance.

Build your children’s self-esteem to increase their resiliency

- ▶ Children and teens who feel good about themselves are often more “resilient,” which means they are able to recover from difficulties more easily. To help ...
 - Praise your children when they do well.
 - Recognize their efforts in addition to what they achieve.
 - Ask your children questions about their activities and interests to show you care.
 - Help your children set realistic goals and learn how to solve problems. That will help them experience successes and feel confident about what they are able to do.

Be aware of your children's emotions

- ▶ If your children have been exposed to an upsetting situation or difficult news, pay attention to their emotional state.
 - Do they seem distant?
 - Do they seem more quiet than usual?
 - Are they more anxious?
- ▶ Invite your children to talk about their feelings so you understand how they are doing.

Be aware of your own emotional state

- ▶ Children are usually very aware of their caregivers' feelings. They often notice tone of voice, body language, and conversations going on around them. They can tell when others are stressed, afraid, or sad.
- ▶ While it's important to be honest with your children, try as much as possible to avoid overwhelming your children by your own reactions.
- ▶ It can be helpful to share your own emotions, but in a controlled and reassuring way. For example, you might say: "Yes, I am worried about this situation, too. But we'll find a way through this together."

Share clear information and encourage open-ended conversations

- ▶ It's always best for children and teens to get information about a traumatic event from a safe, trusted adult.
- ▶ Invite your children to ask you questions and tell you what they need. Don't assume that your children are worrying about the same things you are.
- ▶ Ask your children direct, open-ended questions and show your sincere interest in hearing what they have to say.
 - You might ask "Have you heard about ...?" or "Do you know that ..."
 - Then you can ask questions like: "What did you hear about it?" "Is there anything you don't understand?" "Are you feeling ok?"
 - Your children may have heard misinformation that you can help correct. They may have exaggerated fears that you can address.
- ▶ If needed, be patient and repeat information a few times.

Be honest

- ▶ Children and teens often know when adults aren't being honest.
- ▶ Tell the truth about how you're feeling. If you're scared, say so, while being as calm and reassuring as possible.
- ▶ It's also okay to say that you don't know the answer to a question.

Don't avoid tough subjects

- ▶ Sometimes, parents try to protect their children by avoiding upsetting subjects. But most children are exposed to more than we think, and their fears can grow bigger if they are not addressed.
- ▶ If your children ask you about an upsetting situation and you avoid the topic, it might reinforce their worries. Children often believe that if a subject is too scary to talk about, it might be even worse than they think.
- ▶ It is important that your children know you are available to help them make sense of their experiences – good and bad. Children need to know that strong emotions do not mean they have to feel helpless or overwhelmed.
- ▶ It is normal to feel sad and confused when problems arise. Let your child know that it is ok to ask you questions, now and in the future.

Don't provide too many details or information your children don't need to know

- ▶ While you don't want to shield your child from the truth, be age appropriate in your discussions.
- ▶ Younger children can take in less information. Some details may be too upsetting and not necessary for them to know. Give simple explanations.
- ▶ Try to limit how much news coverage your children see. Repeatedly seeing disturbing events on TV or hearing about them on the radio can make problems seem even worse. Children who believe bad events are temporary can recover from them more quickly.

Think about the right time and place

- ▶ Although it is important to respond to your children's questions, try to talk about troubling issues when you aren't distracted.

- ▶ You need adequate time and attention to discuss your children's understandings, fears, worries and concerns.
- ▶ If your children ask a question at an inappropriate time, like when you are grocery shopping or rushing to get to school, tell them the topic is important and you want to discuss it at a better time. Then follow-up as soon as possible.
- ▶ And don't force your children to have a conversation before they're ready. Open the door for them to talk, but don't push.

Be sympathetic and non-judgmental about your children's reactions and feelings

- ▶ Children's reactions will vary depending on their age and past experiences. There is no right or wrong way to react to traumatic news or to grieve.
- ▶ Reassure your children that there are many ways people respond to difficulties, and let them know that their response is fine.
 - Some children prefer not to talk much. Maybe your child will want to talk later.
 - Other children need to express their feelings, and you can listen.
 - Some children like to have time alone to deal with their emotions. Others want to be around people.
 - Let your children know that people behave in all different ways. Some people cry when they are sad or afraid, but other people don't. It's all okay.
 - You can also try other ways to express feelings, such as drawing or writing.

Be reassuring

- ▶ Feeling secure is critical for children and teens.
- ▶ Even if you're afraid or sad, let your children know you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- ▶ Try talking about a time in the past when they were brave in the face of a scary situation. Talk about how they coped with fears before.
- ▶ Remind your children that no matter what happens, you'll be there for them, and that together, you will get through the situation.

Try not to minimize your children's fears and concerns

- ▶ Do not dismiss or ignore your children's feelings. For example, simply saying "it's not so bad" can make children feel embarrassed or wrong for feeling the way they do.
- ▶ Listen openly and talk about positive ways your children can manage their fears and anxieties.

Maintain routines as much as possible

- ▶ Doing things in the usual way helps restore a sense of safety. It reassures children that life will be okay again.
 - Try to maintain regular mealtimes and bedtimes.
 - If you are temporarily relocated, establish new routines as quickly as you can.

Encourage your children to do things they enjoy

- ▶ Distraction is good for children. Doing something relaxing and fun gives them a sense of normalcy. It will give you a positive break, as well.

Help your children relax with breathing exercises

- ▶ Breathing deeply can help children calm down.
 - Try practicing slow, deep breathing.
 - Say, "Let's breathe in slowly while I count to three, then breathe out while I count to three."
 - For young children, you can place a stuffed animal on their belly as they lie down. Ask them to breathe in and out slowly and watch the stuffed animal rise and fall.
 - Stop for a moment and take several deep breaths yourself if you are feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

Reach out for support yourself

- ▶ Children are not alone in feeling sad, upset, angry, and anxious when times are difficult.
- ▶ If you can, talk through your own feelings with someone you trust.
- ▶ Bring in a trusted family member or friend to be part of conversations if that will help.
- ▶ Sometimes helping your children requires helping yourself, as well.

Remember that your children can recover and you can help

- ▶ Be positive about what is ahead. Don't assume that a traumatic event is so upsetting that your children will never recover.
- ▶ Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say or do – sometimes there is no answer that will make everything okay right away. Know that you are making a real difference by listening to your children, accepting their feelings, and being there for them.
- ▶ Try to eat healthy foods, drink enough water, get outside when you can and walk around, and get enough sleep. Your physical health is connected to your emotional health.
- ▶ Pay close attention to how your children are responding and seek professional help if you need it.
 - Talk to your school about counselling services.
 - Talk to your doctor about what might help.
 - Do not be afraid to seek assistance.

Adapted from

- ▶ NYU Child Study Center: www.aboutourkids.org/articles/talking_children_about_difficult_subjects_illness_death_violence_disaster
- ▶ Caring for Kids. Information For Parents From Canada's Paediatricians. https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/mentalhealth/mental_health
- ▶ Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event. Child Mind Institute. https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-after-a-traumatic-event/#block_bbede789-dc0c-46b6-9489-6be91bfca5f6