

Talking to children about crisis

When tragedy strikes, youngsters naturally turn to their parents for support and comfort. They need help in overcoming their fears. Plus, they need reassurance that they're safe.

But how can you as parents—who are often upset as well—help your children cope with tragic events? We've put together this list of ideas for guiding your family through tough times, whether on a national, local, or personal level.



Reassure children. Tell your youngsters you love them, will help them, and will take care of them. Remind them that they are safe—and that you and all the adults in their lives will do everything possible to keep them safe.

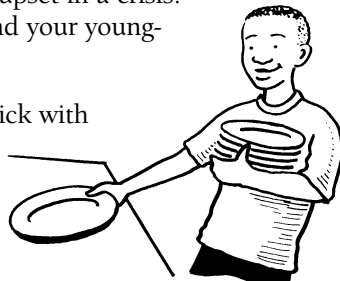
Explain what happened. Tell them the truth, but keep the explanation simple. Children don't need to hear all the details. They just want to know what happened and how the event will affect their lives.

Spend time with them. Focus on your youngsters. Find time to talk with them, hold them, and hug them. Extra cuddling and bedtime stories may help, too. Remember, you can talk about things other than the crisis at hand. Be available for regular conversation and just for “hanging out” together.

Remind your children that you're nearby. When you have to be away from them—at work or doing errands—give them a phone number or a way to contact you. If they come home from school to a babysitter or neighbor, call to touch base. Just knowing you are reachable may make them feel more secure.

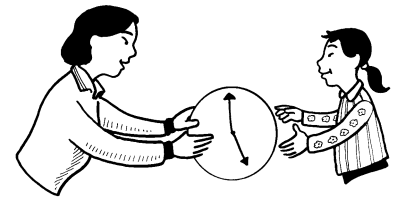
Model calm behavior. Children take their cues from you. Naturally, you will be upset in a crisis. But try not to be too upset around your youngsters for too long.

Maintain normal routines. Stick with regular meal, homework, and bedtime schedules. Keeping activities as normal as possible will show your children that their world is secure.



Be a good listener. Youngsters need to share their feelings and fears. Listen to their concerns, stories, and worries. Let them know that it's okay to have feelings of anger, fear, or sadness. And encourage them to talk about their feelings. Say, “I can tell that you feel sad. What is making you sad today?”

Keep television time to a minimum. Pictures on television news or the Internet can be frightening for children. Also, repeating images can make them think the event is happening again and again. Try to limit television and Internet use during this time. If they do watch, sit with them and discuss what they see. In the car, keep the radio turned to music rather than news.



Use school resources. Ask your school counselor for advice. Find out what they and the teachers are doing to help students—they may be sharing handouts or holding special group meetings for youngsters.

Go outside. Take a walk or have a picnic outdoors. Find a quiet place to sit in the woods. Being a part of nature can help bring on peaceful feelings.

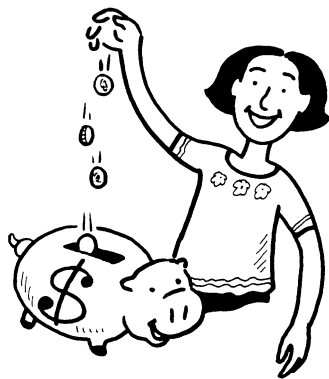


Discuss who's in charge. This is a good time to talk about the helpers in the community. Point out the work being done by police officers, firefighters, rescue workers, doctors, and nurses to keep everyone safe and healthy. Explain what the government is doing to help, too.

Review emergency plans. Go over escape routes, and practice fire drills. Be sure your children know whom they should call or go to in an emergency. Keep emergency numbers posted by the phone. Youngsters may feel less anxious and gain a sense of control over events when you discuss or rehearse emergency plans.

Take in the arts. The arts can be a great healer. Play music in your house. Sing songs together. Take your family to a high school play, community theater production, or concert. Hands-on activities, such as painting, drawing, or sculpting with clay, can also be calming.

Set up a "family giving fund." Have your children make a bank out of an empty oatmeal container. Start your fund by depositing your loose change each evening. Your youngsters can donate part of their allowance, birthday money, or other earnings. Then, donate the money to a charity chosen by your family.



Get together with friends and family. Make sure to give your children opportunities to play with their friends. Try to meet other families for dinner or an outing. Visit relatives who live nearby. This helps remind youngsters of the support they have, not only from their parents, but also from extended family, neighbors, and friends.

Have some fun. Play in the park. Go bowling. Ride bikes. Go swimming. These kinds of activities can help you and your children get your minds off the crisis. Physical activity gives youngsters and adults an emotional release, too.



Give peace a chance.

Talk about ways to be peaceful and loving. What can your family do to promote peace in the community? In the world? Create a peaceful environment in your home to encourage your children to be peaceful individuals. Speak politely to each other, and treat each other with respect.

Take care of yourself. Your youngsters need you more than ever during times of crisis. Be kind to yourself—eat well, exercise, get enough rest, and take a little time for yourself. The better shape you're in, the better shape your children will be in.

Editor's Note: Are your youngsters having trouble sleeping, or are they sleeping too much? Are they having nightmares or wanting to sleep in your bed? Are they eating too much or hardly at all? Are they afraid to leave home or go to school? If these kinds of problems persist, talk to your pediatrician or school counselor. They may be signs that your children need extra help recovering from the stress brought on by crisis.

Additional resources

- The website of the National Association of School Psychologists has ideas and articles on helping youngsters cope with crisis. nasponline.org, 866-331-NASP
- The National Education Association Health Information Network offers guidelines on talking with children and watching television during difficult times. crisisguide.neahin.org/crisisguide/tools/p3_2.html, 202-822-7570
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has advice for parents on reacting to their youngsters' stress and resources for children who need extra help. samhsa.gov/MentalHealth/Tips_Talking_to_Children_After_Disaster.pdf, 877-SAMHSA-7