

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAGEDY

High profile tragedies, such as acts of mass violence or natural disasters, are frightening and upsetting. Children and youth will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Families, caregivers, and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. Adults can help children understand what is happening factually, how events do or do not impact their lives, and how to cope with their reactions.

KEEP EXPLANATIONS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Communications should be tailored to the specific needs, age, and developmental level of each child. Balancing the amount of detail provided with reassurances may be important at any age.

Early Elementary

Answer questions simply without extensive details; balance with reassurances that they and their loved ones are safe and protected.

Upper Elementary and Early Middle School

Provide factual information to correct misinformation. Help separate reality from fantasy. Invite students to share their thoughts and offer alternatives of expression, such as play acting or drawing.

Upper Middle and High School

Listen to students' ideas and observations about current safety efforts. Emphasize why and how to: follow school safety guidelines (e.g., not opening exterior doors), report concerns, and get help. As needed, assist them with safe and prosocial advocacy and involvement.



REAFFIRM SAFETY

- Reassure children that adults are working to keep them safe at school and at home.
- If appropriate, share how the chance of being personally affected by the threat is low.



ACKNOWLEDGE AND NORMALIZE FEELINGS

- Allow children to discuss feelings and concerns, but don't force them to talk about the disaster or incident.
- Listen, empathize, and let them know most initial reactions are normal.
- Obtain assistance for feelings and concerns that may suggest that the child (or anyone else) is in harm's way.



MAINTAIN A NORMAL ROUTINE

- Keep a regular schedule, and remember that healthy nutrition, sleep, and exercise are important to promoting physical and mental health.
- Encourage maintenance of school attendance, work, and extracurricular activities, but do not push children who seem overwhelmed.



STRENGTHEN PEER SUPPORT

- Children with strong emotional supports are better able to cope with adversity.
- Peer relationships can decrease isolation and supplement support from caregivers who are experiencing their own distress.



TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN NEEDS

- You'll be better able to help children if you are coping well.
- Take time to address your own reactions as fully as possible.
- Talk to other adults, take care of your physical and mental health, and avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.



SEEK HELP FOR PROLONGED SIGNS OF DISTRESS

- With the help of naturally occurring social support systems, most children will be fine. However, some may have reactions requiring professional help.
- Get professional support for children whose reactions continue or worsen after a week or more.
- Your child's school can be a great source of support.



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
School Psychologists

For additional guidance, visit
www.nasponline.org/safety-and-crisis