

Helping Children Cope with Disasters, Tragedies, and Tough Times

When disaster strikes – whether it's an act of nature like a tornado or hurricane, a scary incident like the Boston Marathon Bombings or Newtown, CT Shootings, or a personal loss such as a death in the family or divorce – we all feel the stress and effects. Young children are particularly vulnerable to these types of events because they may not understand or fully comprehend what happened or why it happened. In these tough times there are some things you can do to help your child cope – here are some tips we've gathered and some resources to visit for more information.

Remain Calm, Assure your Children they are Safe, Explain What Happened

Remind them that responsible, trust worthy adults are in charge (like the police, their parents, etc).

Tell children the truth about what happened; stick to the simple facts. Make sure to keep your explanations developmentally appropriate for their age.

Monitor Stress

Both that of your child and your own – if your child has a history of stress, depression, etc pay particular attention to their behaviors and moods. Seek help of professionals if you think your child is having a particularly difficult time with the situation. Don't forget to take care of yourself too. Talk to friends, family and community members; get support from religious leaders, mental health counselors, etc if you need it. You can't take good care of others if you are not in your best condition so be sure to get proper sleep, nutrition and exercise and don't be afraid to let others know that you are sad or upset – it's important to feel and express your emotions and to show your children that it's OK to do so.

Maintain Your Routine

As we all know, routines are very important to children and they provide a sense of normalcy and comfort. Try to keep as regular a routine as you can so that your child doesn't feel like their immediate world has been affected, even if everything else seems a bit confusing and scary. Assure them that everything is OK and that they are safe. Make sure your children get adequate nutrition, exercise and sleep.

Tune Out – Avoid Overexposure to Media

After a tragic event the 24 hour news machine kicks into high gear – do whatever you can to shelter your children from the television, radio, and Internet news sources. Often there are graphic images and descriptions of the event that children do not need to hear or see. Also, young children might not have the capability yet to understand that the events they see on TV are not happening close to their home or school, which can be terrifying for them.

Answer Their Questions

Calmly explain to your children about what happened – giving them as little or as much detail as you feel comfortable. Then, encourage and answer their questions so they are not left with any doubts or fears. Be sure to keep in mind their age and development level when answering questions or explaining what happened.

Recruit Them to Help

After the dust has settled, perhaps you can involve your children in the clean up, recovery, or assistance efforts. Encourage them to join you in doing charitable work or help them create a card or note of encouragement for those who might be suffering. Try to assure your children that while bad things might happen from time to time, the world is full of good people who are looking to help others in their time of need. Involve your children in planning how to help too, they might come up with an idea that you never thought of!

Additional Resources

National Association of School Psychologists - http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/terror_general.aspx

Mental Health America - <http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/coping-with-disaster/helping-children-handle-disaster-related-anxiety>

Fred Rogers Institute - <http://www.fci.org/new-site/par-tragic-events.html>

Child Care Aware of America - <http://www.naccrra.org/programs-services/crisis-and-disaster-resources/crisis-and-disaster-resources-for-parents>