



How to support a child after a tragedy

When a tragedy such as an act of violence, terrorism or natural disaster occurs we experience many emotions—sadness, anger, despair and confusion—our basic ideas about safety called into question. We want to reach out to the people that we care about and we wonder how to help the children in our lives deal with their fears and questions. The good news is that there are simple things adults can do to support children after a tragedy.

1. Be available and talk honestly with your child about what happened.

Let your children know that you are available to talk with them and listen to their feelings and concerns. Your child may already be aware of what has happened and think it is not okay to talk about it with you unless you bring it up. If your child is in school, has access to the internet or news at home, chances are they will hear about the event.

Explain what has happened in the most manageable truth. Let your child's questions lead the way – answer them as best you can. "I don't know" is an acceptable answer. Use words appropriate to your child's age, developmental level and language skills. It is normal for young children to be repetitive with their questions. Be patient, answer questions as they come up.

Be honest about your own feelings about the tragedy while being careful not to overwhelm your child. Sharing your feelings gives your children the courage to share theirs. Keep in mind that your worries and concerns may not be the same as your children's. Ask your child what worries and concerns they have about the tragedy rather than assuming they share yours. Remember that children will pick up on your anxiety so try to remain as calm as possible.

Be respectful of children who do not feel comfortable talking about their feelings. Art, play, music and movement can provide a means of expression. Other children may not want to talk about the tragedy at all.

2. Reassure your child and reinforce their sense of safety.

Children may feel as if they are not safe and worry whether a similar thing could happen in their town or to their family and friends. Discuss how events like this are rare and talk about the measures that are in place to keep people safe. Give the message that the adults in their lives are doing their best to keep them safe at all times. Help them identify adults they know and trust who can help them when they need it. Encourage your children to tell a trusted adult if they ever have a safety concern or see something that makes them uncomfortable.



Maintain your usual routine and continue to engage in activities that you and your children enjoy. Routine provides a feeling of predictability and control that can be disrupted after a tragedy. Enjoyable activities remind us that it is okay to be happy and can distract us from unsettling thoughts or feelings.

3. Monitor your child's exposure to television images and news coverage.

Repeated exposure to images and stories about the tragedy can make feelings of unease worse. Research has shown that some young children believe the events are re-occurring each time they see an image or hear about an event. Young children may be confused and think the event is happening again and again. Older children, especially teens may already have seen this coverage. Be sure to talk with them about what they understand. Clarify any myths, misinterpretations, rumors, etc.

Even for adults, watching repeated coverage or hearing personal stories on the news can be hard. Take a break from the news and think about an activity the family can do instead. Create some quiet time to be with your children doing something that you both enjoy.

4. Connect with your community for support and action.

Helping others and maintaining a sense of community can help reestablish our own sense of safety and restore a sense of efficacy when we feel powerless. Reach out to others in your community to provide support to each other and find ways to make a difference. Access any spiritual resources your family may participate in. Keep in touch with your child's school – find out how the school is responding to the tragedy and let them know what your child needs.

5. Access more help if needed.

Recognize children's response to a tragedy often shows up in their behavior. Most children will not be significantly impacted by hearing news of a remote tragedy and you will see little or no change in their behavior or play. Children who have had previous trauma, have experienced something similar to the event or who have other significant stressors are more likely to experience greater distress.

Behaviors after a tragedy such as: preoccupation with the event; persistent feelings of sadness; aggressive, destructive or risk taking behavior; prolonged sleep or eating disturbances; intrusive thoughts; difficulty going to school or leaving a parent indicate a need for more help. If you or your child needs more support, you can call your local crisis line. In Maine, this number is 1-888-568-1112 or you can dial 711 for information and referrals.