

Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters

The effects of violence and disasters can result in post-traumatic stress disorder. Fear, depression or anger can be overwhelming, often requiring the support of adults. Symptoms of young children with PTSD can include crying, clinging, regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, and fear of darkness. School age children may have anger outbursts, fighting, nightmares, sleep problems, irritability, and refusal to attend school, stomach aches, depression and anxiety. Adolescents may have any of the symptoms listed for younger children, with possible additional symptoms such as substance abuse, peer relational difficulties, isolation, academic decline, suicidal thoughts, avoidance, sleep disturbances and confusion.

Helping children and adolescents feel safe is essential for their recovery. Support, compassion, reassurances are needed. Develop coping and problem-solving skills to manage anxiety. Take time to listen and discuss their fears and other feelings that have resulted from the traumatic event.

Top Ten Ways to Help a Child Who Has Been Traumatized:

1. Recognize the grief and loss; a child's sense of security and safety has been threatened, which changes their world-view.
2. Use accurate words of event to help create a safe place for your child to tell their story with feeling words
3. Recognize a child's need to express themselves symbolically, with dolls, art, puppets, stuffed animals and imaginary play.
4. Fears and nightmares may develop. They may have difficulty trusting, or feel guilty, that they should have been able to change the outcome of the traumatic event.
5. Anger, rage, confusion, desire for revenge and loneliness may also be symptoms of distress. These feelings, if not expressed appropriately can lead to violence, loss of appetite, headaches, stomachaches, and sleeplessness.
6. Be watchful of children who withdraw and become quiet (typically girls). This suffering in silence is just as painful, and needs to be expressed.
7. Maintain the child's routine. This stability and consistency provides a sense of security during a time full of uncertainty.
8. Do not give special privileges, compensations, or a break from normal rules, chores, and expectations. A child wants to feel as normal and like their peers as possible.
9. Be prepared to listen with your ears, eyes, and heart to what your child has to teach you about his or her grief.
10. Consider having the child meet with a professional, if even for one session, to rule out the need for play therapy.

Rituals that can help: writing a letter, poem or story about the event. Reading books that relate to feelings your child is experiencing. One of my favorites is *There is a Nightmare in my Closet* by Mercer Meyer. Collect objects, or do a collage that relate to what has happened. Bury it afterwards. Let a balloon go as a symbol of hope for rising above and beyond the current pain you are trying to let go of. Build and knock things over. Play a game that is physical enough to express anger, whether it is kicking, throwing, or hitting a ball. Laugh and cry together. Lots of hugs and kisses. A comfort bear or favorite stuffed animal to sleep with.