

Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

- 1) **Reassure your children that they are safe.** Do this periodically, especially when you notice that they are upset or anxious. Tell them that many adults, such as you, other parents, police, firemen, airplane pilots, and teachers are working hard to make things safe.
- 2) **Provide extra adult supervision, physical closeness and affection for your children** to help them feel protected. However, it is important that you do not hover over them in such a way that they feel in continuous danger.
- 3) **First, attempt to help your children tell you what upsets them. Then provide information and reassurance.** This approach will give you an opportunity to correct misinformation. Children tend to have an exaggerated view of facts and can be upset needlessly by their imaginations and stories shared by their friends.
- 4) **Try to reestablish a routine for your child.** This will help your child feel more secure.
- 5) **Reduce young children's exposure** to conversations of adults if you feel the discussions are not appropriate for your child. Attempt to supervise and censor T.V. news or other programs which you feel might be disturbing to young children.
- 6) **Help your children by being an example of someone who can talk about feelings.** It is okay to tell your children that you are sad (crying is okay) because other people are hurt. It is also all right to share with your children that you were frightened when you saw or heard what happened, but that you feel better now, knowing that the community is working to make things safe. It is even okay to say that occasionally you still feel frightened when you remember what happened.
- 7) Some children may temporarily suck their thumb, wet the bed, sleep with a parent, become easily irritated or upset, need a night light, be afraid to walk alone, have nightmares, or cling to a parent. **These are normal reactions which should decrease as time passes. We encourage you to accept these difficulties for the present.** You will sense in the near future when you should encourage your children to return to their previous, more mature, way of behaving.
- 8) **You or your children may have flashback experience.** A flashback experience is when something reminds you of what happened and you feel a very strong sense of fear and panic as you remember. **Here is a techniques which may help.** (You may also wish to seek some professional help with this technique.)
 - a. Tell your child to sit still, close his eyes and make his body rest while he listens to you.
 - b. Ask him to take slow deep breaths. You breathe with your child as he takes in air slowly and lets it out slowly. (This form of breathing will help him feel relaxed.)
 - c. Ask him to notice how comfortable his body is feeling and how it is resting peacefully. He can now open his eyes and end the exercise.
 - d. Practice this technique one time each day for at least a week.

- e. Instruct your child to use this technique whenever he starts to feel very scared. Tell him that it will help the scary feelings not upset him so much.
- 9) Infants and young toddlers can also show signs of being upset. They stand an excellent chance of rapid recovery, and it is highly unlikely they will require any help. **They usually are not directly affected by what they have seen or what has happened; but are indirectly affected when they sense upset feelings in their parents.** The young child easily adjusts as the parents regain their balance.
- 10) Preschool children sometimes have difficulty talking about their feelings, making it harder for parents to help. However, these children very often express their feelings as they play. **As a parent you can communicate your assurance by actually entering into the child's game of play.** If a child is playing with dolls and toys or drawing, you will probably notice that he is expressing a fear. If you feel comfortable, play the role of someone who will rescue, repair, heal, or protect. In this way you can reassure your child through his special language of play.
- 11) Teenagers need encouragement to communicate their feelings to parents, family and friends. Teenagers often feel that they are adults and that it would be childish for them to cry, show fear, or express weakness; this is especially true for teenage boys. **It helps for teenagers to see that other adults can express such feelings without being childish.**
- 12) Teenagers should be encouraged to be involved with their friends. **Teenagers have an instinctive ability to help each other.** Their recovery is accelerated when one helps another.
- 13) Teenagers are capable of very mature thinking. **They are very upset, often more than adults, by the feeling that life is unfair and that life can be taken away so suddenly.** They become concerned and confused about the meaning of life. It is often difficult for a parent to deal with such concerns. However, **sharing these ideas and feelings is a growing experience for both parents and teenagers.** (You may also wish to consult someone of your religious faith in dealing with this issue).
- 14) **You may wish to use religious and cultural resources to help your family.**

OUTSIDE PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

- 1) If your children's symptoms are so severe that you are worried about their health or school performance, feel free to seek professional advice.
- 2) If your children actually experienced the death of a close friend or relative, we encourage you to seek some professional guidance **now**. This will assure that the natural healing process of time will continue without complications.
- 3) If your child's symptoms do not begin to improve after two months, we encourage you to seek professional assistance.
- 4) **If you as a parent feel that you are so upset that you find it very difficult to offer reassurance and communication to your children, we encourage you to seek some professional help for yourself.**