

Helping Children Cope: Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Stressful events can be difficult for children to understand and to manage. Children's reactions to stress and trauma are unique to each child, and they're also affected by his or her age and developmental stage. **It's important to remember that the way you handle your own reactions will directly affect how well your children manage their reactions to stressful events.** Helping your child feel safe by providing reassurance and routine is critical.

What Can You Do For Your Child When Stressful Events Happen?

Families provide protection, love, security, a sense of identity, and nurturing and support for all members. These are important strengths to draw on during stressful times, and there's a lot that adults can do to help children cope with difficult experiences.

Adults bring a lifetime of experience, whether positive or negative, to stressful events, which will impact how we respond to new situations. Adults can draw on these experiences and know they can cope and move through a stressful event. Children, however, often do not have many life experiences to draw on. **Your child will look towards important adults for guidance and reassurance.** Adults need to be physically and emotionally available to children during stressful times. Other ways to help your child:

- Whenever possible, children should be in a familiar environment with people they feel close to.
- Keep your child's daily routines the same as much as possible. There is comfort in having things be consistent and familiar.
- Limit the amount of exposure to distressing media images.
- Provide brief and honest communication based on what you think your child can best manage.
- Honor your child's need to talk about the event; try to have time alone together, when possible.
- Encourage your child to play sports and games with peers, when possible.
- Older children may withdraw emotionally or need time alone apart from the family. Try to encourage them to talk with friends.
- Let your child know how you are feeling, so they understand their feelings are also valid. At the same time, talk about what you are doing to cope and manage your feelings, and how as a family you all can help each other.

Understanding children's common responses to stressful events can help adults prepare for how they might respond. It's normal to expect that your child may have problems with eating, sleeping, toileting, and schoolwork, and they may show unusual emotions and behaviors. There may be other specific reactions depending on your child's age and level of development, like the following.

Typical Reactions to Stress and Trauma by Age

Children Under 3 Years

Child's Response:

- Children can be more irritable, cry more than usual
- They may act like a younger child; they may return to bed wetting after they have been toilet trained
- They may be frightened to be without parents nearby

Suggestions for Parents:

- Hold your child more often to reassure and soothe the child
- Keep the child with parents, other family members, and familiar caregivers
- Keep routines the same to help your child feel that things are safe and predictable

3-5 years

Child's Response:

- These children can remember events
- They may see death as a reversal condition
- They may be concerned that the event may occur again which can prompt angry or sad feelings

Suggestions for Parents:

- Listen to and tolerate the child's retelling of event
- Respect the child's fears; give child time to cope with fears
- Increase monitoring and awareness of child's play, and set limits on scary or hurtful play
- Let the child try out new ideas to cope with fearfulness, such as extra reading time, or having a radio on or music in the middle of night to undo effects of fearful nightmares
- Your child may overhear conversations about the event or hear or see coverage from the media. Although your child may not understand what they are hearing or seeing, they may feel scared or anxious, or act out. Do your best to:
 - turn off the television when your child is around
 - not talk about the event in your child's presence
 - remove magazines and newspapers with images of the event from your child's view

6-12 years

Child's Response:

- At this age, children will begin to understand the permanence of loss
- They may become preoccupied with the trauma and talk about it over and over

Suggestions for Parents:

- Encourage the child to talk about traumatic events with family members
- Provide opportunities for young people to spend time with friends who are supportive
- Reassure them that strong feelings, whether of guilt, shame, or a wish for revenge, are normal following a trauma
- Do not offer false reassurance
- Encourage pleasurable physical activities such as sports and exercise
- Talk with your child's school counselor or school social worker to learn about their school's crisis plan. Review the plan to your child to help them feel prepared and less anxious.
- Encourage your child to talk with their teacher, school counselor, or school social worker if they are feeling upset at school.
- Limit the media coverage that your child is exposed to – the less the better.
- Your child may overhear conversations about the event or hear or see coverage from the media. Although your child may not fully understand what they're hearing or seeing, they're likely to have thoughts about the images or information. If your child has been exposed to media coverage or knows about the event and feels fearful, listen to their fears and provide them with a safe place to talk. You do not need to share additional details about the event with your child

Adolescence

Child's Response:

- Adolescents will realize that death is permanent, but may deny it
- They may engage in dangerous or risk taking behaviors as a way to deal with strong emotional reactions
- They may not be able to talk about intense feelings; therefore, the adolescent may emotionally withdraw and avoid social activity
- They may seek additional information about the event

Suggestions for Parents:

- Be aware that even though the responses may be adult-like, the child may not actually be coping well
- Encourage your adolescent to talk with friends, other family members, and individuals at school or in the community
- Encourage your teenager to talk with their teachers, school counselor, or school social worker if they are feeling upset at school

- Discuss the impact of media – what they’ve noticed and what they think about what they’ve heard. Most importantly: Talk about what they can do to feel safe and calm when they hear distressing news coverage.

Where Can You Get More Help?

Many families can cope without outside help. However, there are times when reaching out is important – when the stress is too much or your child’s reactions are different or bigger than usual. Extended family members or religious leaders may offer needed help, but sometimes when the stress is ongoing, it can be helpful to seek out more information or to talk with a trained professional who can provide more support.

