

Jan 2005 - When there is a tragedy

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Used with permission from When there is a tragedy - Child and Youth Health

Sometimes on a world basis, or on a local community basis, something tragic happens that touches all members of the community. The following information is to help parents to support their children through a tragedy. Parents will experience a range of emotions from shock to fear and anxiety. Children can be affected by their parents' response to something like this, as well as by what they see and hear directly. The closer children and young people are to the tragedy the greater the impact is likely to be, but even distant exposure to trauma can have an impact on their emotional wellbeing. The impact can be immediate or can come some time after the event.

What should you say?

How much you talk with children about an event such as this will depend on the age of the children and how closely it touches their lives. As far as possible it is usually advisable to protect very young children from things that they cannot understand and which may make them fearful. However children can make up worse things if they know something is wrong but don't know what it is, so simple explanations that reassure them that they are safe and you are there caring for them will help if they are aware of the problem.

As children get older they need more explanations and time to talk.

Very young children (preschool)

- Young children are worried by different things from adults and may not even seem to notice major traumas, however they are very affected by parent's responses and feelings.

- Try not to show your own anxiety because children will quickly pick up your feelings and know there is something wrong. If it is close to home and children know you are upset, reassure them that it is not to do with them and that you are caring for them.

- Turn off the TV. It is very hard for young children to make sense out of what they see and hear and it can be very frightening. As children get older and into adolescence you will want to share your feelings and talk about the issues to develop their understanding.

- At all ages it is most important to listen responsively and respectfully.

- Try not to discuss what has happened in front of the children.

- Keep to normal routines, which give young children a sense of safety and security.

If your children have already heard or seen something about it:

- listen to their feelings calmly, give them time to talk without pressure;

- explain that what has happened is in another country and a long way away (if this is true) and reassure them that they are still safe;

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give lots of physical reassurance; and

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give lots of opportunities to play, draw and paint (without guiding them). This helps children to deal with feelings and get a sense of control.

Signs of stress

Young children show worries by sleep problems, going back in their development, e. g. wetting the bed again, clinging and behaviour problems. If these things happen your child will need extra reassurance and support. Give children more support as they need it, e.g. allow them to sleep near you for a time.

School-age children

- Most children of this age will have heard what has happened and will have some reactions, as they understand the reality of what has happened and may worry that it could happen to them.

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It is still a good idea to protect them from the TV. Visual images can have a powerful impact. If they ask questions, give them information without unnecessary detail.

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You may have to answer the same questions over and over as the child tries to make sense of what has happened. Give as much information as they want but avoid unnecessary or frightening detail.

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Give opportunities to talk about their feelings and their fears. Validate their feelings as real. Let your children know they can talk to you any time they are afraid.

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Keep to routines that provide a sense of safety. Some things you can do in the time when you usually watch TV might be playing games, walking the dog, shopping, gardening, a bike ride – things that give your family a sense of togetherness.

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Try to help them with their fears by talking through the issues according to their age and understanding, e.g. 'Sad and scary things do happen in the world but they are rare and there are lots of sensible people who are working to stop things like this happening'. Talk about the people who are helping.

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You may need to show that they are safe in whatever ways are true, e.g. that such events are rare, that where you live is different, that your home is safe etc.

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Most of all think about your own response. When things like this happen it touches our own sense of insecurity. It is really important to hold on to the sane and down to earth aspects of our daily life and this is what will make the world feel safe for your children.

Signs of stress

School age children may still show worries through behaviour as well as or instead of talking about them. They may show them by not wanting to go to school, by nightmares, behaviour problems or by physical symptoms such as headaches or tummy aches. If your children are showing worries in this way it is important to help them to talk about their fears.

Bedtime is often a good listening time.

Parents

Adults also need support from each other. Talk about your feelings with friends. Remember that there are many, many people working together to make the world a better place, and there will be many heroic deeds happening during the crisis that will not be seen on TV but which attest to the sane and good forces in the world. Keep up your usual routines and things you enjoy and try not to watch too much TV!

For all children and young people, remember that you are the rock for your children. If you keep calm and caring they will usually be OK.

If necessary, seek help – if you are worried about your own or a child's immediate or ongoing reactions, ask for help. You could call a parent helpline or your local health professional.

Doing something to help

Children and young people can be helped by feeling there is something they can do to help. This helps to give a sense of control when things are overwhelming.

This could be, for example:

- attending a church service or other spiritual ceremony for the victims;
- writing a letter of sympathy and support;
- giving toys, food or clothing;
- raising money for the victims or for organisations which support peace;
- volunteering their time in whatever way will be helpful; and let them see you helping as well.