



# IN THE AFTERMATH OF A TRAUMATIC EVENT:

## Talking to Children

Processing a traumatic event is difficult and painful not only for an adult, but can be especially disruptive, confusing, and distressing for a child. Knowing how to approach the subject with children can be daunting, as discussing the impact and details of a traumatic event should be handled with care.

Depending on the age and developmental level, a child's ability to understand and process a traumatic event differs from that of an adult. It's perhaps most essential that you be patient and non-judgmental with how your child responds to distressing events. Also keep in mind that each child's method of coping may look different.

Regardless of age, as humans, we want to feel safe and naturally seek reassurance, especially after a traumatic event. While your instinct in these moments is to comfort and protect your children, know that they can sense when an adult is being inauthentic. Such messages can cause confusion for your child make it difficult for them to process.

Throughout the recovery period, remember that the human spirit is incredibly resilient, and that the capacity for children to adapt can be remarkable. Treating them with respect and framing what you tell them in a way that is age-appropriate go a long way toward fostering that resilience. While these are general guidelines, trust your intuition regarding your child and model reaching out for help from others.

## GUIDELINES FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN

### CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

When discussing a traumatic event to any child, it may be helpful to employ the SafeSEA framework:

**SAFETY:** Ensure that the child is safe

**SUPPORT:** Take actions to support the child

**EXPRESSION:** Encourage the child to express themselves in their own way

**AWARENESS:** Remain watchful and aware of how the child is affected

### YOUNG CHILDREN

- ▶ Engage directly using a calm voice to assure them you'll keep them safe
- ▶ Be present when you're with them
- ▶ If you leave, tell them when you're coming back
- ▶ Keep to your normal routine as much as possible, including meals and rest time
- ▶ Limit or eliminate exposure to media
- ▶ Allow them to play or draw to express their feelings and thoughts
- ▶ Encourage them to ask questions
- ▶ Hold or hug them if they're receptive
- ▶ Watch for aftereffects, as the child may regress (e.g., want to sleep in your bed), become extra clingy, cry more, or withdraw

**NOTE:** Aftereffects are usually temporary symptoms and can subside with reassurance and acceptance.





## SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN



- ▶ Assure them that you and others are committed to keeping them safe
- ▶ Engage directly and offer physical comfort
- ▶ Limit or eliminate exposure to media
- ▶ Keep to your normal routine as much as possible, including school and family obligations
- ▶ Work with school and community organizations to build the network of support
- ▶ Encourage verbal expression and affirm that their feelings are normal
- ▶ Ask for their understanding of what happened and correct any misconceptions or false information
- ▶ Spend more time than usual with them (e.g., attend more of their games or school events and be available for quality time)
- ▶ Watch for aftereffects, such as concentration problems or uncharacteristic behaviors (e.g., aggression at school or withdrawal from others or activities)

**NOTE:** Address the immediate problem while gently seeking to connect the behavior to the event

## ADOLESCENTS



- ▶ Let them know you and others are committed to keeping them safe
  - You may get push-back, but they still need to hear it
- ▶ Suggest limiting exposure to media, and model this behavior
- ▶ Keep to your normal routine as much as possible
- ▶ Work with school and community organizations to build the network of support
- ▶ Encourage verbal expression and affirm that their feelings are normal
  - One way to do this is by sharing your feelings and thoughts about the event, which can help validate for your child what they may be feeling but aren't saying
- ▶ Be available for physical comfort if they're receptive
- ▶ Discuss the event together and allow for strong expressions of anger or revenge and retaliation
  - Talk it through, allowing for emotions while also discussing consequences
- ▶ Be prepared for a range of emotions
  - Your child may exhibit anything from sadness and grief to anger and rage, anxiety and fear to no apparent display of emotion at all
- ▶ Watch for aftereffects, such as emotional changes (e.g., fluctuating between emotional extremes or laughing inappropriately), uncharacteristic behaviors (e.g., acting out), and problems at school

**NOTE:** Address the immediate behavior, then discuss the potential connection between the behavior and the event

## TALKING TO CHILDREN:

### A Final Note

Self-care is especially important as a first step toward caring for children.

**Children of all ages** can see and sense when you're unsettled and will respond accordingly. They may take on your behavior or try to comfort you, or they may experience a mixed message when they receive reassurance from you while seeing you denying your own distress.

- ▶ Be honest about what you can handle and reach out for support for yourself in the interest of the children you want to reassure.
- ▶ Be aware of your caregiving capacity and limits. Reach out to family, friends, colleagues, communities, and professionals for help, for you and your children. Social support may be the most crucial factor in building, promoting, and sustaining recovery and resilience throughout our lives.