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Helping Children Regain Their Emotional Safety After a Tragedy

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When tragedy strikes, the results are traumatic both for those directly affected and for the community of people who know them or identify with them. Although we cannot control the fact that a tragedy has taken place, adults can do a great deal to help children regain their emotional safety.

The following Kidpower recommendations are consistent with the advice from trauma experts from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Stay Calm

During upsetting times, kids are emotionally safest if they believe that their adults are calm and in charge. The negative impact on children will be greatly magnified if the adults around them sound anxious and as if their lives are out of control. Parents, teachers, and other caring adults need to be aware of what kids overhear as well as what they are told directly. Remember that kids who seem oblivious are often absorbing information as adults talk on the phone, chat nearby, or listen to the car radio.

Using a caring and matter-of-fact face and voice, adults can help kids by making true statements that contain a positive message. For example, "I am sad that this happened, and we are all going to work on ways to be safe everywhere." Or, "This is hard for everybody. Even though we are very sad and worried right now, lots of people are working hard to make sure that everyone stays safe." Remember to be factual. If a child asks a question and you don't know the answer, you can simply say, "I don't know."

Of course, in the face of a tragedy, adults often need support too. When we feel overwhelmed, it's important to seek help from other adults away from children. When kids are around, they need their adults to act as if things are going to be okay even though something bad has happened.

Take Charge of What Children Hear and See From the Media

Media stories about tragic events can be compelling and cause us to believe that watching is doing something important and helpful. The problem is that exposure to terrifying images and horrifying stories is often unnecessarily traumatizing for adults and kids alike. Seeing upsetting situations on TV can feel as if it is still happening right now, even though the event is over.

Unless you are in the midst of an emergency where you truly need minute-by-minute updates for your safety, turn off the radio, television, and Internet so that kids are not bombarded with this information. There is a difference between staying informed so we can take action if need be and becoming consumed with the need to know immediately in a way that becomes traumatic.

Explain what Happened in a Calm, Age-Appropriate Way

Focus on reassurance and hope rather than going over the details again and again about what happened. Children are literal thinkers, so be careful when using words like “sick” or “problems.” We don’t want kids to worry that this will happen if their loved ones get sick, are hurt, or have problems.

For example, children who know of a family tragedy can be told, “This is very sad, and we will do everything in our power to make sure that this will not happen here. _____’s dad was so hurt inside that he did hurtful things. He did not know how to get help with his problems. We are going to do what we can to make sure everyone who has problems knows how to get help.”

For tragedies that are dramatic but happen rarely, you can say, “This almost never happens. This is very scary and very sad. We are going to do our best to make sure that it doesn’t happen again.” Describe some of the things that are being done to ensure safety in your community, at your school, and in your family.

Help Young People to Express Their Feelings Without Making Them Take Care of Your Feelings

Tragic events can bring up feelings of upset, worry, sadness, and anger for adults and children. However, it is not a child’s job to take care of adult feelings.

Instead of being burdened with adult feelings, children need us to help them understand and work through their own feelings. Listen when kids talk, even if they say the same things over and over. Give reassuring answers to worried questions. If this is a child’s first experience with death, be prepared to explain what death is. Hospice has wonderful resources on how to talk with kids about this subject.

Dealing with upsetting experiences is a process that can involve many feelings over a long time. Some children have difficulty talking about their feelings. Give kids alternative ways to express their feelings. They can write a letter, draw a picture, plant a flower, or help someone else. Many kids work out their feelings through play or stories.

Sometimes adults want so badly for children to feel better that they do not give them permission to be upset. Pressure to pretend to feel a certain way can become especially intense around family celebrations or events. If a child doesn’t want to go with usual activities, then find ways to engage the child while being supportive of her or his feelings. Instead of trying to force a child to participate, listen to the child, offer choices, and ask, “What would you like to do?”

People grieve differently and at different times in different ways. Accepting children’s feelings means letting them know that it is okay to feel sad when they are sad, angry when they are angry, and happy when they are happy.

Give Young People Positive Ways to Feel in Control

Tragedies often leave people feeling helpless and out of control. Give kids opportunities to regain their sense of power and control by letting them make positive choices when possible. This can be as simple as deciding what to have for dinner or which game to play.

Give Extra Support and Reassurance

Hug children as much as they want. Spend time with them. Tell them over and over that you love them and that you are going to do everything you can to keep everybody important to them as safe and healthy as possible.

Be Aware of and Prepared for Behavioral Changes

Rather than express their emotional discomfort in words, kids may complain of physical ailments like an upset tummy or a headache as their response to a crisis. This may be frustrating for family members but it is important to remember to be supportive and patient.

Children and youth might regress into behavior they had when they were younger, such as bedwetting or being clingy. Some children may have increased anxiety, feel more sad, feel hopeless, and may become sensitive or irritable.

If young people are moody, distracted or aggressive, help them control their behavior without shaming them. Seek professional help if your child seems unable to move forward with your support alone.

Be a Good Role Model for Handling Conflict

The stress caused by a tragedy can increase irritability for adults too. Minor irritations can lead to major explosions.

Even more than usual, young people might be hypersensitive to angry, upset behavior from their parents and other adult family members. Make sure that any anger looks in-control rather than out-of-control. Try to resolve conflicts without becoming attacking.

Remember that children and teens are learning more from what you do than from what you tell them. Show how to stay calm and respectful even when you feel upset. Use positive communication skills to work out disagreements. Get help with problems. Walk away from trouble.

It is normal for adults to feel overwhelmed in the face of traumatic events. If adults have difficulty coping, they and their loved ones may benefit greatly from seeking guidance and emotional support from a mental health professional. Often extra counseling services are available through schools, emergency services, and places of worship during and after a tragedy.

Show Children How to Recover From a Bad Situation

None of us want to have to deal with tragedy, but a great deal of learning can happen during hard times. Showing young people how to move through bad situations can create lessons for them that will help them for the rest of their lives.

My grandmother once described for me how her father died the month that she turned thirteen years old. Her family lived in a village in Poland in the early 1900s. "Even after all these years," Grandma wrote, "I remember every minute and all the pain of it."

Ten days after my great-grandfather died, there was a holiday for children to celebrate the coming of spring after the bitter winter in that part of the world. My grandmother and her sisters

and brothers thought that there would be no holiday for them that year because they were mourning for their father. They were astonished to see my great-grandmother coming out in the morning of that day with a huge tray carrying an assortment of every fruit she could find.

Grandma wrote, "I do not remember my mother saying anything at all. But, to me, it sounded as if she were saying, 'Yes, you are entitled to have fun. Yes, you have a right to play and to merriment.' My heart and spirits lifted and I could swallow the lump in my throat. I raised my head and felt health and energy returning." Then she added, "Talk about child psychology – my mother had never heard of it!"