

In the Aftermath of a Traumatic Event: Talking to Children

A traumatic event is likely to set off a chain of reactions that can be painful and difficult to process for an adult. For children, a disruptive event can be confusing and distressing. Knowing how to approach the subject with children can be daunting.

The impact and details of a traumatic event should be approached with care for children. Depending on the age and developmental level, a child's ability to understand and process a traumatic event differs from an adult's. Perhaps the most essential thing is to be patient and non-judgmental with how your child responds to distressing events. Each child's method of coping may look different.

An individual of any age wants to feel safe and seek reassurance, especially after a traumatic event. At the same time, children can sense when an inauthentic message is being delivered, and this may cause confusion that they can find difficult to process.

Throughout the recovery period, remember that the human spirit is incredibly resilient, and the capacity for children to adapt can be remarkable. Treating them with respect, while framing what you tell them in a way that is age-appropriate, goes 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: Talking to Children of All Ages

When talking about a traumatic event to any child, it may be helpful to think of the following framework "SafeSEA":

- **Safety:** the adult ensures that the child is safe
- **Support:** the adult takes actions that support the child
- **Expression:** the adult encourages expression in the child's own way
- **Awareness:** the adult remains watchful of the ways a child is affected

Guidelines: Talking to Young Children

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

NOTE: These are usually temporary symptoms and reassurance and acceptance will help

Guidelines: Talking to 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 the 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 of feelings and affirm that they are “normal”
- Ask for their understanding of what happened; then correct any misperceptions
- Spend more time than usual with children (e.g., attend more of their games or school events; be available for quality time)
- Watch for aftereffects; look for different behaviors (e.g., aggression at school or withdrawal from others); concentration problems

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

Guidelines: Talking to Adolescents

- Let them know you and others are committed to keeping them safe; you may get pushback but they still need to hear that
- Suggest limiting exposure to media—and model that behavior
- Keep the routine as much as possible
- Work with school and community organizations to build the network of support
- Encourage verbal expression of feelings, and affirm that those feelings are “normal”—one way to do this is to share your feelings and thoughts about the event, as a way for an adolescent to affirm what they may be feeling but not 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 feelings while also discussing consequences
- Be prepared for a range of emotions, which may or may not happen, from sadness and grief to anger and rage to anxiety and fear, to no apparent display of emotion
- Watch for aftereffects; look for different behaviors (i.e., acting-out behavior); emotional changes (i.e., going back and forth between emotional extremes or laughing inappropriately); school problems

NOTE: First address the immediate behavior and 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 sense if and/or when you are unsettled and will respond accordingly. A child may take on your behavior, or may try to comfort you, or may experience a mixed message by your reassurance even as he or she sees how you deny your own distress. Be honest about what you can handle, and reach out for support for yourself, on behalf of the children you want to reassure. Be aware of your caregiving capacity and limits, and ask for help for both you and your children by reaching out to family, friends, colleagues, communities, and professionals. Social support may be the most crucial factor in building, promoting, and sustaining recovery and resilience throughout our lives.

Federal Occupational Health’s (FOH) Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program is available 24/7 to provide support to federal employees. Professionally trained counselors can help minimize the impact of a stressful or disturbing event and help promote resilience. The program provides counseling, problem solving, coaching, and support to assist employees and their family members with a wide range of issues or concerns.

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FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH
Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
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