

Department of Family & Consumer Sciences

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC NEWS

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During times of tragedy, such as experiencing mass violence or witnessing tragic news, children are met with information that is difficult to understand and process. In response, they experience big emotions, like intense fear, grief or uncertainty, that can be hard to talk about and manage. If left unchecked, children may resort to unhealthy ways to cope with troubling information. The goal of this fact sheet is to overview how children respond to tragedy and simple strategies and resources for supporting children.



Types of Tragedy^[1-3]

Whether children are directly affected by a tragedy or hear news of a tragic event, children will be hypersensitive to the event. Some caregivers may feel it is best to avoid discussions about tragedies to protect children from discomfort. Yet talking openly to children is important as they need reassurance that they are safe and loved. Tragedies may include:

- Death of a loved one
- Medical Trauma
- Suicide
- Natural disaster
- Community Violence
- Mass shooting
- Terrorism
- Warfare

How Children Respond to Tragedy

Children respond to crisis in varied ways depending on their age or stage in development, how severe the event is, and how often they are exposed to the event. Even if they aren't directly affected, children are also varied in their responses to tragic news. To add complexity, children who have a past history of different types of traumas may experience heightened sensitivity compared to their peers with no trauma histories.

Strategies to Support Children During Tragedy

Commonly, children's responses to tragedy might include:

- Greater confusion and questioning about the event(s).
- Increase in stress symptoms.
- Feelings of fear, grief or worry.
- Worrying about the safety of themselves or their loved ones.
- Showing increased dependence, like clinging to others, separation anxiety or not wanting to be alone.

Less commonly, children may show signs that they are not coping well. If these signs become more frequent and intense over time, children may need professional help. Some warning signs include:

- Regression: Returning to behaviors they have outgrown, like bedwetting, thumb sucking or separation anxiety.
- Physiological changes: sleep troubles, changes in appetite, headaches or stomach problems.
- Emotional changes: persistent or obsessive worry about death, their safety or the safety of others; inability to calm emotions easily.
- Behavioral changes: poorly performing in school, compulsive or obsessive behaviors, losing interest in normal activities, conduct problems or social isolation.

Strategies for Helping Children Cope with Tragedy^[4-9]

Seek Professional Help

Particularly for those directly affected by tragedies or who exhibit warning signs that they are struggling, children will fare best with professional help from a licensed counselor, doctor or other medical professional.

- Find a licensed psychologist by visiting: locator.apa.org.
- Find online mental health resources: extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W992.pdf.
- Search for mental health and suicide services: tiny.utk.edu/suicide-prevention.
- Call the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Helpline: 1-800-560-5767.
- Seek out a referral from your pediatrician or health insurance provider for in-network providers.

Memorialize the Event

Helping others when in need can be therapeutic. Find some type of outreach event to memorialize or respond to the tragedy. Send thank you notes to first responders, plant a tree or attend a service in honor of those lost, or volunteer at a local shelter.

Prepare a Family Emergency Kit

When learning about disasters and other tragic events, children may feel comforted by preparing a family emergency kit of materials and a plan that identifies what to do if there is an emergency. Kid Central TN⁹ has a list of items to prepare in your family emergency kit and resources on disaster preparation.

Find Fun Distractions

Particularly for children who are struggling with tragic news, finding fun events can temporarily distract them from what is bothering them. Here are some ideas:

- Find a favorite (or new!) recipe for you and your children to cook together. Search for the recipe, create a grocery list, shop together and start cooking.
- Go on a long walk or hike outside. Note the things you see, hear, smell, feel and taste as you explore the outdoors. Bring a picnic or snack so you can take a break, refuel and admire your surroundings.
- Plan a movie pajama night stocked with pizza and/or your favorite snacks. You may even want to invite a few friends to participate and spend the night.
- Arrange for a weekend day trip to a fun family event near you, like a family festival, children's museum, trampoline gym, zoo, aquarium or carnival.
- Go to the craft store to select a fun craft to do together, such as making sand or glitter jars, painting, making slime and more.
- If you have the means to do so, find an affordable place to vacation to change your surroundings. Go camping, visit an amusement park, explore a new city or visit the beach.

Learn More

1. Child Mind Institute, "What Makes an Event Traumatic for a Child?"
<https://childmind.org/article/makes-event-traumatic-child/>
2. American Academy of Pediatrics, "How Children of Different Ages Respond to Disasters" <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-Children-of-Different-Ages-Respond-to-Disasters.aspx>
3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Behavioral Health Conditions in Children and Youth Exposed to Natural Disasters"
<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/srb-childrenyouth-8-22-18.pdf>
4. Child Mind Institute, "Helping Children Cope with Frightening News"
<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-cope-frightening-news>
5. The National Child Trauma Stress Network, "How to Support Children After a Crisis"
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//after_a_crisis_helping_young_children_heal.pdf
6. The National Child Trauma Stress Network, "Resources on Terrorism and Violence"
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence>
7. KidCentral Tennessee, "How to Talk to Children About Tragic Events"
<https://www.kidcentraltn.com/support/crisis-services-for-children/how-to-talk-to-children-about-tragic-events.html>
8. National Association of School Psychologists, "Helping Children Cope with Terrorism"
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/war-and-terrorism/helping-children-cope-with-terrorism>
9. KidCentral Tennessee, "How to Prepare Your Family For Emergencies"
<https://www.kidcentraltn.com/content/kidcentral/health/safety/how-to-prepare-your-family-for-emergencies.html>



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