

# Tips for Responding to Children and Youth after Traumatic Events

Traumatic events, such as natural disasters, shootings, bombings, or other violent acts, can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure.

Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has seen the event on television, or has merely hear

## Adolescence

Children ages 12-14 are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, schoolwork or other responsibilities they previously handled. Though they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they also may withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug use.

These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as “normal” by their friends, and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in family activities they once enjoyed.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the traumatic event. Older teens may deny the extent of their reactions to the traumatic event.

## How to Help

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the event honestly, but do not dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, writing, or artwork; and to find a way to help others who were affected by the event.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine, and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Temporarily reduce your expectations about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.

Acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

## Tips for Talking to Children After a Traumatic Event

- x Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they are seeing on television and to ask questions.
- x Do not be afraid to admit that you cannot answer all of their questions.
- x Answer questions at a level the children can understand.
- x Provide ongoing opportunities for children to talk. They probably will have more questions as time goes on.
- x Use this as an opportunity to establish a family emergency plan.

x In addition to the tragic things