

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH A TRAUMATIC EVENT
A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

A traumatic event may take many forms. The emotional effects of a disaster on you and your child can be tremendous. One of the difficulties experienced by parents during disasters is that they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact of the disaster on their child.

The following are some common reactions in children:

- difficulties sleeping and/or nightmares
- changes in eating habits
- poor concentration
- nervous behavior
- irritability
- physical complaints
- exaggerated startle response
- lack of energy
- fears about safety
- worry over safety of loved ones
- fear of being alone
- withdrawal or isolation
- repetitious play
- reenactment of events in play
- changes in mood or affect
- acting out

The following are quick tips for parents in helping your child cope with a traumatic event:

- encourage your child to express their feelings through talking, drawing, and playing
- be attentive and encourage your child to ask questions
- offer support as your child interprets the events
- find out what your child may be thinking and feeling in reaction to the traumatic event
- be direct and give honest information
- provide verbal reassurance that you will do everything possible to ensure your child's safety
- reassure your child that other adult authority figures (elected officials, school officials, the police) will do everything possible to ensure safety
- do not flood your child with too many television images of the tragic event
- acknowledge normal feelings and reactions
- encourage healthy ways to cope

NEEDS OF STUDENT(S) DURING A CRISIS

- An honest accounting of the facts and relevant details.
- Reassurances about safety and security.
- Opportunities to actively process the event by talking, writing, drawing, listening to stories, hearing others talk, etc.
- Opportunities to ask questions.
- Time for the event to sink in.
- Opportunities to process the event over and over again.
- Information on how the surviving family members are doing.
- Opportunities to be actively involved in doing something helpful, a discussion should take place about putting up a feedback memorial board, collection donations, etc.
- Opportunities to express feelings, share memories, cry, etc.
- Observing adults in the modeling of the expression of feelings.
- Validation for how they are feeling including seemingly inappropriate laughter (possibly due to anxiety or need to release tension).
- Encouragement and reassurance that “Life goes on.”
- Help in understanding that their feelings of sadness, anger or grief will subside in time—they will not feel this way forever.
- Support from adults that going in and out of grief is fine and normal. Feelings can seem to appear from out of nowhere.
- There should be an opportunity to express their feelings, but also keep in mind that behaviors are kept in a respectable and orderly fashion.
- Continued structure and a return to normalcy.
- A stable environment and predictable schedule.

SIGNS THAT A STUDENT OR ADULT MAY REQUIRE PROFESSIONAL HELP

Any of these signs may be present initially following a critical incident or in the grieving process. Pay attention to these signs if they persist over time or if you notice a significant change in behavior from what the student or adult normally presents. If you are not sure but are concerned about the individual, consult with a school mental health professional or member of the Crisis Response Team. If necessary, contact the student's parent(s) and invite him or her to meet with you and a school professional to discuss any additional support resources that the student may need. Adults may need referrals to mental health therapists or agencies. [When appropriate, signs should be included in letters to parents].

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Changes in eating (less or more)
- Changes in sleep (less or more)
- Significant loss of energy
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Stomach aches

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Aggression and inappropriate displays of power and bullying
- Withdrawn or regression
- Overachieving—"Trying too hard"
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Self destructive
- Excessive daydreaming
- Compulsive care-giving
- Accident-prone
- Stealing or other illegal activities
- Use/abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- Unable to speak about the deceased

EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Persistent anxiety
- Hopes of reunion with the deceased
- Desire to die
- Clinging to others
- Absence and / or denial of all grief
- Strong resistance to forming a new attachment
- Expression of only negative or only positive views of the deceased