

Parenting Tips

How to help your child cope after a tragic event

Listen Children may ask lots of questions about what is happening. This is a normal reaction. Be patient with your child, try to answer their questions openly and honestly.

Let children know that they are safe The main thing children want to know is that they and the ones they love are safe. Let your child know that your main responsibility and the responsibility of other adults (firemen, policemen) is to keep them safe.

Turn the TV off Resist the urge to watch continuous coverage of tragic events. Continuous watching of scary events can re-traumatize your child. As they see images on TV, children may not understand that these are past events being replayed and might believe the event is occurring over and over again. Instead of watching TV, use that extra time to read a book to your child.

Normal reactions to tragedy Aggression, fatigue, destructive behavior, reversion to an earlier developmental stage, lack of appetite, upset stomach and headaches are all ways that stress, anger, sadness and scared feelings come out in children. Have them draw pictures, work with clay, let them rip up old phone books. This can help children express their feelings. Encourage them to talk about their feelings with you or another trusted adult. If the events have especially affected your child to the point that it is interfering in their daily routine, consider seeking help from a mental health professional.

Stay in a routine Routines are comforting to people of all ages, especially children. Have a set time that the family eats, plays, does homework and goes to bed. Having a routine makes children feel safe in their immediate surroundings, even if the world outside seems like a scary place to them.

Develop a safety plan Often after a tragic event children want to be near their parents and loved ones. If you must be away from your child, give them a number that where they can reach you at and let them know they can call you at any time to check in. Also give them the phone number of a trusted neighbor, 911 or another family member. Letting them know that there is a procedure in case of an emergency will help them to feel safe.

Regulate your own emotions Take time to care for yourself and think about your own reactions to the event. Children and adolescents are very perceptive of their parents' feelings and your fear can be contagious. Be honest with your children about your feelings. If you are sad about recent events, share that with them. It can validate their own feelings of sadness.

Get Involved For some children, knowing that they can be part of the solution can help in the healing process. Contact an organization like the Red Cross and ask how you and your children can help.