

# **HELPING CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA**

Adapted from *Children and Trauma* by John Leverington  
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## **I. Introduction**

Traumatic events such as natural disasters, violent acts, and serious accidents are frightening to children and adults. It is important for parents to know how a trauma or crisis can affect children and how to help them deal with it. Children's ability to deal with a traumatic event is primarily dependent on the reaction of the parent or some other caring adult.

Remember that children are good observers but poor interpreters. Children see, hear, and feel the impact of a trauma or crisis and the reactions of others to the event. The way they understand their parent's responses is very important. Children are typically aware of the adults' anxieties and worries, but during a crisis they are particularly sensitive to the feelings of significant adults around them.

As adults we need to acknowledge our concerns to children in appropriate ways, but balance this with clear explanations of the ways we together can cope with the situation successfully. It is not helpful to falsely minimize the danger or fail to sufficiently answer a child's questions regarding what happened (out of a false sense of protection). It is important to invite them to process what they are hearing, seeing, and feeling by listening supportively without judging or correcting their feelings.

Children vary in how they respond to trauma. Some children may not experience distress. Many will effectively process their distress in days and weeks following the event, if given the opportunity in a supportive environment. Others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months. Children may not show a change in behavior but still need help. Thus it is important to talk through the incident with children and listen for signs of trauma.

Young children, having less experience in distinguishing a real threat from an imaginary one, are likely to be plagued by fears with no basis in reality. It is important to understand that fantasized danger can be as real and as threatening as present danger to these children.

Adults are often surprised that even in the absence of physical injury, children may experience significant fear and exhibit unusual behaviors. Rather than being troubled that a child's behavior disrupts or interferes with daily routine, adults must allow that child safe opportunities to talk or work through the trauma with counseling or play therapy. One must recognize that a child who expresses or acts out fear is afraid and then take the necessary steps to get that child help.

## **II. Factors that affect a child's response to trauma**

A child's reaction depends a lot on how directly the child was involved in the traumatic event. If the child experienced destruction and/or death of others, it will have a more profound effect. If

the catastrophe involves a family member, friends, schoolmate it is more difficult. Also, if the event involved destruction of the child's home, school, church, or any place that is part of the child's daily routine, there is a greater chance the child will experience difficulties.

Age is also an important factor in how the child will respond to a disaster. The younger the child, the less ability the child has to understand the event.

Below are typical reactions of children in various age groups.

#### **A. Babies to five years old**

Children this age cry a lot, have clinging behavior, chew clothing, throw things, thumb suck, sit in one place for prolonged periods of time, become overactive or act out the trauma in play.

#### **B. Children age 6-12 years old**

These children often show a regression in behaviors such as toilet training and sleeping alone. Problems such as thumb sucking or bed wetting may recur. The elementary age child may also demonstrate stress by becoming involved in fighting, being wild, isolating himself, refusing to do things, or eating poorly. Watch also for symptoms of heightened anxiety including stomach aches, nightmares, or difficulty in carrying on the regular routine. This can happen to people of all ages, but children need special attention to help them through it.

#### **C. Teenagers**

Teenagers may show symptoms of trauma by changes in mood, being more irritable than usual, lacking concentration, not completing assignments, or not following directions. They may also become self critical and experience survivor guilt.

#### **D. Other considerations**

Widely varying behaviors and emotions are normal reaction in the first days and weeks following a traumatic event and are experienced by most children. The long term effects of trauma depend on the child's age, maturity, ability to communicate and relate to others, where the event took place, and if the child was injured. However, *the single best predictor of how well children deal with trauma is the parents' or significant adults' response.*

Balancing appropriate expressions of emotion with a plan to overcome the trauma together will facilitate the child's processing of the event.

Don't let the child blame other people or things as an excuse for his behavior. We don't want our children to think of themselves as victim. We want them to take

steps to actively deal with their pain and confusion and make choices to grow from the experience.

#### **E. Safety**

Regarding safety, it is important to reassure children of safety measures you have taken, asking them what they need to feel safe and acting on it, but not guaranteeing things you cannot provide or do. Keep your answers to children's questions simple and age appropriate.

#### **F. Tell the story**

Remember that young children can employ magical thinking and may believe that they somehow caused the trauma. Reassure them that you know there is nothing that they could have done to cause it or prevent it. Also reassure them that there is no right or wrong reaction, and encourage them to talk about their feelings, fears, and questions with you. They may need to tell their story over and over again. Writing, drawing, and play are effective ways for children to process trauma. Allow them many ways to tell their story. Just as for adults, children often need to process the event numerous times before they can move beyond it effectively.

#### **G. Threats children experience.** Trauma sends four messages to children:

1. Your world is no longer safe.
2. Your world is no longer kind.
3. Your world is no longer predictable.
4. Your world is no longer trustworthy

### **III. Ways to help children deal with a trauma or crisis**

#### **A. Listen non-judgmentally.**

- Ask your child to tell their story. Listen for any wrong assumptions or fears and if they are blaming themselves for what happened. It is important to listen. Sensitively correct wrong thinking.
- At unexpected times, the child may want to talk about the event. Stop all that you are doing to listen during this time. They may also want to talk about it very briefly, then resume playing.
- When children want factual information about what happened be sure you tell them. They are trying to make sense of the tragedy. They may even develop theories as to why it happened. You should encourage this.
- We need to understand that the unknown also causes fear. Be sure your child knows what happened. If he doesn't know, he will assume the worst.
- If the child seems reluctant to talk about the trauma, ask them how they think other kids are feeling.

**B. Help children learn to use words that express their feelings,** such as sad, scared, angry, or happy. Remember you as a teacher or parent have also been affected by this event so be sure the words you use fit the child's feelings and not yours.

**C. Re-establish a sense of order and routine.** One way may be to try to keep to the daily structure as much as possible. A regular schedule helps recreate a sense of security for children.

**D. Plan and carry out activities that will calm the child.** Encourage young children to use art (drawing, painting, cutting out pictures in magazines, etc.) to express their emotions. Older children can be offered opportunities to draw, write poems, or journal their feelings. Display the child's work or have them describe or read it to others.

**E. Reassure children that the event is being dealt with appropriately.** People are getting medical attention; the police are responding to the criminals; the buildings are being cleaned up or repaired, and support is being offered to those affected by the trauma.

**F. Organize playtime to allow children to be children** in order to overcome the emphasis the trauma has had on their lives. Develop play therapy activities through the use of puppets, art, music, or drama to facilitate the expression of feelings that the trauma generated and to develop effective coping strategies. Provide clothes, toys, and art materials so children can express creatively both their concerns and how others (like nurses, police, and firemen) are helping those who hurt. After a crisis, just the freedom to play and be children is so important. Here are some activities:

- Draw a person in the rain. Ask the child to explain what the pictures mean.
- Draw a picture of your family. Ask the child to explain what the pictures mean.
- Draw a tree, house, and you. Ask the child to explain what the pictures mean.
- Play the one-to-ten game. Write the numbers 1-10 on a piece of paper. For each number ask the child for his favorite\_\_\_\_\_ and why. E.g. Favorite animal, plant, color, object, time of the day, day of the week, place to visit, game to play, bird, toy, food, natural resource, clothing, furniture.

**G. Read stories about crisis situations and how people helped those involved.** Stories that illustrate how God provided for those involved and how other people cared for them after the disaster are especially effective.

**H. Help children get involved in caring for those affected by the crisis** (trauma) through writing letters, sending pictures, baking food, or other ways to help that fits with their abilities. Actively doing something to help others refocuses children's thoughts or emotions in healthy ways without minimizing them. Think together with the children about ways to contribute to the needs of others by collecting some needed goods, clothing, food, or money that can be given to those who need it. Include the children in the planning.

**I. Parents and teachers should consider an increased in transition time between activities.** For example, lengthening story telling or cuddling at bedtime may be

necessary the first few nights after a trauma. In the classroom, teachers can help students transition by allowing extra time to prepare students for a field trip or for taking a test since trauma decreases our ability to think clearly and effectively.

**J. Secondary reactions may emerge**, such as fear of riding on a plane, going by the location where the trauma occurred, or leaving parents. Anticipate these and prepare for them, as well as be observant of your children's reactions in various situations after the trauma. This will help you continue to help your children process the trauma's effects.

**K. Remind children that they have support of other people.** Share letters or comments people have made empathizing with them and praying for them. This will reassure your children that others care about them, making them feel less alone and vulnerable. Assure them that people (friends and relatives) will take care of them.

L. Establish positive anniversary activities to recognize the event and commemorate those who died or the losses that were experienced, as well as recognizing the progress in overcoming the effects of the event and God's provision in the midst of it. It is important to acknowledge and accept that there is still pain and sadness but to also celebrate survival.

M. Find practical ways to incorporate Bible promises that God is with us even in trauma (Isaiah 43:5, Psalm 139). Together discuss ways God evidenced His care in this trauma and thank Him for His provision.

N. Pray with children regarding their fears. Help them memorize Bible verses regarding fear (Isaiah 41:10).

O. Help children work through their normal questions regarding why God didn't protect them from this trauma/crisis. Use this difficult situation to teach a more in depth understanding of God's sovereignty, man's free will, and the work of Satan in the world.

P. Look at Scriptures that express feelings and how people dealt with them, (many Psalms are good for this, David's experience in 1 Samuel 16-18, 20,21).

Q. Talk positively about the future. Discuss future events. Make plans for some future event (vacation, marriage, college, etc).

R. Discuss issues of death openly. Make sure the child understands they are not to blame for someone's death.

S. Look for ways to reduce the child's fear. If he is afraid to get on a bus, then ride on the bus with him to show him it is alright.

#### IV. Things to avoid

A. Don't laugh at your child and tell him it is silly or foolish to feel that way.

B. Don't ignore his feelings and hope they will go away by themselves.

C. Don't pay too much attention to the fear. Don't focus on it.

D. Don't compare your child to other children.

E. Don't add to his fear by telling him about other tragedies in the world.

F. Don't allow him to see your fears uncontrolled.

G. Don't add to his fears by being apprehensive and paranoid yourself.