

How to Support Children after a Traumatic Event

Make your child feel safe. All children, from toddlers to teens, will benefit from your touch—extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. It gives them a feeling of security, which is so important in the aftermath of a frightening or disturbing event.



Maintain routines as much as possible. Amidst chaos and change, routines reassure children that life will be okay again. Try to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. Help children enjoy themselves. Encourage kids to do activities and play with others. The distraction is good for them and gives them a sense of normalcy.

Share information about what happened. It's always best to learn the details of a traumatic event from a safe, trusted adult. Be brief and honest and allow children to ask questions. Don't presume kids are worrying about the same things as adults. Prevent or limit exposure to news coverage. Children who believe bad events are temporary can more quickly recover from them.

Understand that children cope in different ways. Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Let your child know it is normal to experience anger, guilt and sadness, and to express things in different ways. Help children relax with breathing exercises. Breathing becomes shallow when anxiety sets in; deep belly breaths can help children calm down.

Acknowledge what your child is feeling. If a child admits to a concern, simply confirm what you are hearing: "Yes, I can see that you are worried." Know that it's okay to answer, "I don't know." What children need most is someone whom they trust to listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say—after all, there is no answer that will make everything okay.