

## **Talking to Children Immediately After Traumatic Events**

### **Immediate and Ongoing Tasks**

When a tragedy such as suicide or unexpected death occurs, parents become concerned, worried, or are in shock. Children also become scared, confused and are in disbelief. They are likely to be worried about their future and most importantly, about their family and other significant people in their lives.

Be aware that children will have information—they hear it from teachers, peers, media, etc. Our role is: (1) to make sure that information is correct and (2) prevent children from drawing catastrophic conclusions from the information. How can we do this?

Following are some guidelines for dealing with children in the days and weeks following a traumatic event:

- Determine your child's risk for problems. Those most at risk are children who have some personal experience with the tragedy; who may have been close to the area or have family or friends who have been hurt or killed, or who have had previous mental health problems.
- Provide reassurance. Children will be affected by a parent's mood and reaction. Calm parents encourage calm in their children. Parents can show children that they too are sad but should temper their own intense emotions.
- Keep in mind that children's reactions depend upon their age, personality and coping style. Some children want to talk about the details, some are quiet and concerned, some may show an increase in their activity level, and some may prefer to get along with business as usual.
- Don't be afraid to talk about the tragedy. Start by finding out what the children already know and have seen. Listening to the children and answering their questions help them deal with issues in their own way. Children are likely to be concerned about things of immediate importance.
- Be truthful and honest in answers, using language the child can understand. Hiding information causes children to feel confused, reluctant to turn to adults for help and mistrustful of other information.
- Reassure the children of their own safety and assure them that you and many others are working to make sure they are safe. Reassure them about practical issues in their own lives such as "Mom will still take you to school" and "The police and firefighters are putting out fires so we are safe."
- Have more than one conversation. A child's understanding and questions about difficult situations change over time. Be available and look for teachable moments for further exploration. Reassure them about practical issues in their own lives.
- Allow and encourage expression in private ways, such as through journals or art.
- Maintain as much of a usual routine as possible. Familiarity is comforting to children and provides a sense of normalcy.

- Monitor exposure to media and limit access if necessary. Repeated viewing by young children can be confusing, causing them to believe that events are reoccurring. For older children overexposure can be overwhelming and leave them feeling helpless.
- Expect variations in a child's mood. Different reactions may occur as time passes and new events occur. The situation takes on new meaning as aspects of life may change for the short-term or forever.
- It is common for children to be clingier, to be concerned about separation and to feel the need to be in close proximity to parents or even want to sleep with them. Consider how your own anxiety might be contributing to a child's fears. If sleeping together is allowed for the short term, it is helpful to return to normal bedtime routines as soon as possible.
- Working parents should make arrangements so that the child is not left alone after school during the time of the crisis.
- Be mindful of how issues are discussed with and near children. Prejudice and violence should not be encouraged as ways to solve problems. Seeking to place blame or to exact revenge does not repair hurt feelings or sadness.
- Realize that children who have had difficulty before the crisis may show a reemergence of their problems either temporarily or over time.
- Realize that children may be more vulnerable if other stresses, such as divorce or financial problems, were occurring in the family prior to the crisis. They may need extra support and reassurance to feel in control.
- Attend to the children's and family's basic physical and mental health needs; eating, sleeping and participating in enjoyable activities are necessary and beneficial.
- Facilitate collecting or keepsake and mementos.
- Support a child's preference for public and private participation in memorial rituals, activities, services and activities seeking donations of time and money.
- Stay involved in the children's lives and monitor their adjustment over time. If you are concerned about your child, issues should be explored further with a counselor or mental health professional.
- Use available community, school, social and religious support networks and services.