

Helping Children After a Disaster

For Parents

- 1) **Limit media exposure** about the disaster and monitor adult conversations. Young children may become unnecessarily frightened if they overhear something they don't understand.
- 2) **Talk about the cause of the disaster** - Young children often feel responsible for bad things that happen. Assure them that nothing they said or did caused the disaster events.
- 3) **Spend time listening to your children** - Listen to their thoughts and feelings and normalize their reactions. Explore their fears, sadness, anger, and worries and talk about things that help. Encourage them to also talk with other trusted adults.
- 4) **Encourage children to ask questions** - Be careful not to laugh or criticize their questions, even if they sound funny or uncomfortable. Before answering, ask the child to tell you what *they* think about the issue. This will help you understand what they're thinking so that you can answer with appropriate and honest information. If children don't have enough information, they often fill in the gaps with things that aren't true.
- 5) **Model healthy ways of grieving** - Children take cues from grown-ups about how to cope with traumatic experiences. Model healthy coping by honoring your losses and talking about your worries and fears with family, friends, faith leaders and/or therapists.
- 6) **Accept their play and art about death or tragedy** - Children use play and art to work out what they've seen, heard or experienced. Don't ask them to "play or draw something nice," but rather encourage their natural play, even if it involves death or tragedy.
- 7) **Stick to usual family routines** - Keep mealtimes, bedtime, behavioral expectations, and other activities as routine as possible. This helps children feel safe.
- 8) **Accept regression without criticism**. Children often start exhibiting behaviors they previously mastered. This is normal and temporary.
- 9) **Help children learn and practice ways to calm their bodies** (see [Calming Exercises](#)).
- 10) **Encourage children to play and have fun**. They can't grieve constantly like adults can.
- 11) **Talk about your family strengths** that will get you through the hard times. Encourage children to share their skills with others. Children recover and cope better when they feel helpful.

If you're wondering if your child needs professional help, read [Childhood Traumatic Grief](#) and/or talk with a mental health professional.