

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMA

1 REASSURANCE AND NURTURANCE

After a scary event, most children feel frightened and vulnerable. What they need most is assurance that they will be cared for and protected.

- ▶ Give your child a lot of affection and loving, with plenty of hugs and kisses or touching on the back etc.,
- ▶ Remind your child often that you will do everything you can to protect him
- ▶ Point out what you and other adults are doing to protect the child, i.e. not leaving them with strangers, locking doors at night, etc.

2 REVIEWING AND RECOUNTING

Children, like adults, need to talk about what has happened to them and come to some understanding of it. Younger children cannot talk about feelings of reactions very comfortably, but can show these through play and acting out of an event. They will often play a scene out over and over. What they do not actually know, they will imagine or make up and sometimes their imagination is more frightening than the reality.

- ▶ Give your child as much factual information as possible, & be truthful.
- ▶ Allow your child to discuss his ideas about what happened and respect their opinions.
- ▶ Encourage your child to act out (in person or with dolls or figures) what happened, what they did, etc. Make each re-enactment end on a positive note, emphasizing safety and protection of the child at the end.
- ▶ If the child has difficulty recognizing and talking about their feelings, try to get them to talk about the feelings of other children who were there. Often they will project their feelings onto other children, or say things about other children that they really mean about themselves.

- ▶ Encourage the child's own expressions of what they would do in future situations, especially more realistic and practical ones.

3 REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS

Younger children in particular may show frightened or anxious reactions by slipping back to a younger and less mature stage of development, where they may feel more secure. Expect such things as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, clinging behavior, fearfulness of sleeping alone, nightmares, fears of being abandoned by parents, etc. These are normal and actually healthy reactions, provided that do not go on for more than a couple of weeks or so.

- ▶ Allow for regression, reassuring the child that it is okay because in a few days, they will be back to normal. Be patient, and try not to scold or get angry.
- ▶ If a child asks to sleep with parents, allow it for a night or two, but make it clear that it is only temporary. After 2-3 nights, have the child return to own bed, perhaps with a parent staying with them until they fall asleep. Sometimes it is helpful to offer a treat in the morning (a little treat under their pillow, a special breakfast) if they are able to sleep through the night in their own bed.

4 AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Some children show anger and aggression, especially in the days right after the crisis. They may become difficult to manage, and make it necessary for the adult or caretaker to scold or punish.

- ▶ Understand that the child's security and serenity has been upset and they have a right to be angry.
- ▶ Help your child direct the anger appropriately, i.e. to the person who committed the crime or the source of the crisis, not to those who tried to help or protect the child.
- ▶ Let the child know that the angry feelings are okay, but that doing wrong things in anger are not.

- ▶ Help the child let out his strongest anger in some physical activity (punch a pillow, run around the block, etc.) Then encourage the child to talk about the feelings, or draw pictures that show their feelings, etc.

5 LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Children's response to a traumatic experience depends tremendously on the attitude of the important adults around them. If the parents act as if this is a terrible tragedy, it will be hard for the child to recover. If the parents act as if this is a reality of life and one that must be overcome, the child will usually adjust quite well.

- ▶ Go over with your child what they can do should a similar event ever occur in the future.
- ▶ Emphasize for the child any action, however little or seemingly insignificant, that they did that was appropriate and positive. (Such as going for help, asking another adult, getting away from the situation, etc.)
- ▶ Point out any changes or improvements in the child's life or environment that should serve to provide more protection in the future.

6 POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Some children may be more traumatized than others by the same event. This may be due to previous life experiences (such as a prior death in the family) or because of other stressors already in existence (such as parents getting a divorce). These children may experience symptoms of distress that last a little longer than would typically be expected (a couple of weeks). If this is your experience, it would be advisable to seek professional help. Call your EAP or school guidance counselor.