

REACTIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN FOLLOWING CRISIS and TRAUMA

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What to Expect After Trauma: Possible Reactions in Kindergarten and Elementary School Children

- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self and others, including pets (more clingy to parent, caregiver, and teacher)
 - Children may also be worried about their friends and teachers
 - Children may also worry about regaining “lost things” including activities (scouts, dance sports, etc.)
- Worries about re-occurrence of the event
- Increased levels of distress (whiny, irritable, more “moody”)
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and/or attention
 - Withdrawal
 - Angry outbursts
 - Aggression
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school performance. Generally, there may be a brief decline
 - If a new school, may be worried and anxious about new environment
- Recreating event (e.g., talking repeatedly about it, “playing” the event)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (e.g., sirens, loud noises, storms)
- Statements and questions about death and dying
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Withdrawal
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Increased negative behaviors (e.g., defiance) or emotions (e.g., sadness, fears, anger, worries)
- Regression in behaviors (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)

What Can I Do to Help? Guidelines for Parents/Caregivers of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children

- Reinforce ideas of safety and security. This may be needed multiple times, particularly in response to changes, loud sounds, or other events that may remind the children of the event. After any discussion of the event, end the discussion with a focus on their current safety and a calming activity, such as taking deep, slow breaths, working together on an art project, or holding hands and singing a quiet song, or reading a story.
- Listen to and tolerate your children’s retelling of events, as well as playing out the events. However, set limits on scary or hurtful play or talk.
- Encourage children to talk about confusing feelings, worries, daydreams, and disruptions of concentration by accepting the feelings, listening carefully, and reminding them that these are reactions that many children may have (any of these feelings are okay) following a very scary event. Information focused on safety will be important. For example, people are all working together to make us safe (give examples). This may be a good time to review family safety plans.
- Young children will process the information about the events at unpredictable times throughout the day. As they try to develop an understanding of what has happened, they may ask questions that may be initially upsetting to adults. Try to respond in a calm manner, answering the questions in simple, direct terms. Knowing they can talk to you is important.

- Use simple, direct terms to describe what happened. Avoid terms designed to "soften" the information, which inadvertently further confuses children. For example, use the term "died," rather than "went to sleep."
- Children may misunderstand information about the event as they are trying to make sense of what happened. For example, they may blame themselves, believe things happened that did not happen, etc. Gently help children develop a realistic understanding of the event.
- Children may ask the same types of questions repeatedly, which can be confusing and/or frustrating for adults. Understand that they may need to hear the information multiple times before being able to integrate and understand it. Give them time to cope with fears.
- Maintain the family routines, particularly around sleeping, eating, and extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, church, dance). Be sure the bedtime routine includes safely tucking them in at night. Young children may want a night light again. Make sure your child is receiving a balanced diet and enough rest.
- Maintain expectations. These include expectations about behaviors and respect for others.
- Expect some angry outbursts from children. Try to catch them before they "act out," by taking them aside, and helping them calm down and regain control of their behavior.
- Do activities that will reinforce the message that one person can make a difference to help and to heal. Activities can include drawing pictures and sending cards, helping with donations of clothes, food, etc. When children help others, they recover and cope better.
- Expect some brief, temporary declines in the children's' school performance.
- If children have entered a new school from the impacted area, encourage "buddies" to help with the settling in period.
- Provide reassurance to children that uncomfortable feelings will get smaller and easier to handle over time.
- Expect and understand children's regression (acting younger) and other difficult behaviors that are not typical. (e.g. bed wetting, whining, needing more help with dressing and feeding)..
- Maintain communication with others in children's lives (teacher, coach, etc.). Monitor how the children are coping with the demands of school, home, and community activities. For children that are being relocated following disasters, parents can ask schools, American Red Cross, faith and culture based organizations about how to enroll their children into activities similar to what they were doing before the disaster.
- Avoid exposing your child to reminders of the trauma. This includes limiting your child's exposure to the news and other television programs about the event. If you do choose to have your child see this information on the television, keep it brief, watch it with your child, and talk to your child after to clarify miscommunication. Protecting the children from re-exposure includes limiting exposure to adult conversations about the events - even when you think they are not listening, they often are.
- Avoid unnecessary separations from important caregivers.
- Expect temporary regression in your child's behaviors (e.g., starting to baby-talk, wetting the bed). Do not panic, as your child is likely to return to previous functioning with time and support.
- Provide soothing activities, such as reading books, listening to music, taking a walk, riding bikes, etc.

- For displaced children, investigate resources to allow a return to activities they previously enjoyed.
- For displaced children, talk with them about how they would like to handle questions from new friends about their disaster experience. Provide ideas that may help.
- Increase patience with your child and with yourself. Give your family time to cope. **Find ways to emphasize to the children that you love them.**

What to Expect After Trauma: Possible Reactions in Middle School Children

- Feelings of anxiety, worries, and fears about safety of self and others, including pets.
 - Children may be worried about their friends and teachers
 - Children may worry about “fitting in” with their new school and new activities
- Worries about re-occurrence or consequences of the event, as well as worries about future similar events
- Changes in behavior:
 - Decreased attention and/or concentration
 - Increase in hyperactivity
 - Changes in academic performance (generally a brief decline)
 - Irritability with friends, teachers, events
 - Anger outbursts and/or aggression
 - Withdrawal
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches)
- Increased likelihood to discuss gruesome details
- Repeated discussions of the event. Because the situation may be constantly changing, their questions may also continue and change.
- Intrusive thoughts about the event and its aftermath may arise, making it harder to calm down and focus on other things
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (e.g., sirens loud
- Noises, storms)
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Withdrawal
- Lack of interest in usual activities (e.g., after-school activities, time with friends)
- Increased negative behaviors (e.g., defiance) or emotions (e.g., sadness, fears, anger, worries)
- Denial of impact may be present in some children

What Can I Do To Help? Guidelines for Parents/Caregivers of Middle School Children

- Reinforce ideas of safety and security. This may be needed multiple times, particularly in response to changes or other events that may remind the children of the event. After discussion of the event, end the discussion with a focus on their current safety and a calming activity, such as taking deep breaths, working together on an art project, or having a moment of quiet reflection.
- Listen to and tolerate retelling of events, as well as playing out the events. However, set limits on scary or hurtful talk or aggressive play.
- Encourage the middle-school-aged children to talk about confusing feelings, worries, daydreams, and disruptions of concentration by accepting the feelings, listening carefully, and reminding them that these are common reactions that many children may have (any of these feelings are okay)

following a very scary event. Although children may not wish to talk, it is important that they know you are available to listen at any time.

- Discuss their perceptions of media coverage of the event and its aftermath. Information focused on safety will be important. Review of family safety plans may also be helpful.
- Children will often think about the events at unpredictable times throughout the day. As they try to develop an understanding of what has happened, they may ask questions that may be initially upsetting to adults, including questions that have gruesome details or focus on death. Questions may also change as the situation related to the aftermath of the event changes. Try to respond in a calm manner, answering the questions in simple and direct terms. Knowing you are willing to listen is important.
- Maintain the family routines, particularly around sleeping and eating and extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, church, and dance). Make sure your child is receiving a balanced diet and enough rest. Extra time with friends who are supportive and meaningful to him/her may be needed.
- Maintain expectations. These include expectations about behaviors and respect for others.
- Use simple direct terms to describe what happened, rather than terms designed to "soften" the information, which inadvertently further confuses children. For example, use the term "died", rather than "went to sleep".
- Children will often misunderstand information about the event as they are trying to make sense of what happened. For example, they may blame themselves; may believe things happened that did not happen. They may also feel that they can do more than is possible. Gently help children develop a realistic understanding of the event.
- Children may ask the same types of questions repeatedly, which can be confusing and/or frustrating for adults. Understand that children may need to hear the information multiple times before being able to integrate and understand it. Give them time to cope with fears.
- Expect some angry outbursts from children. Try to catch students before they "act out", by taking them aside, and helping them calm down and regain control of their behavior. In addition redirect siblings who are being irritable with each other which could escalate to direct conflict.
- Do activities that will reinforce the message that one person can make a difference to help and heal. Activities can include drawing pictures and sending cards or helping caregivers to gather clothes for donations. At school, they can befriend a child that is "new" because of the event. When children help others, they recover and cope better.
- Expect some brief (temporary) declines in children's school performance.
- Provide reassurance to children that uncomfortable feelings will get smaller and easier to handle over time.
- Maintain communication with other people in children's lives (teacher, coach, etc.) Monitor how children are coping with the demands of school, home, and community activities. Should difficulties coping with the event persist and interfere with the daily functioning, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. In addition to helping those who are clearly angry or depressed, monitor children who are withdrawn and isolated from others.
- Avoid exposing you child to reminders of the trauma. This includes monitoring your child's exposure to the news and other television programs about the event and its aftermath. If you do choose to have your child see this information on the television, keep it brief, watch it with your child, and talk to your child after to clarify miscommunication. Protecting the children from re-exposure includes

limiting exposure to adult conversations about the events – even when you think they are not listening, they often are.

- Avoid unnecessary separations from important caregivers.
- Provide soothing activities, such as reading books, listening to music, taking a walk, riding bikes, etc. Some middle school students benefit from writing their thought and feelings in a journal or drawing.
- Address acting-out involving aggression or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly with limit setting. Monitor comments about death and dying or suicidal thoughts. If these behaviors are present, seek professional help.
- For displaced children, investigate resources to allow a return to activities they previously enjoyed.
- For displaced children, talk with them about how they would like to handle questions from new friends about their experience. Provide ideas that may help.
- Increase patience with your child and with yourself. Give your family time to cope. **Find way to emphasize to the children that you love them.**

What to Expect After Trauma: Possible Reactions in High School Youth

- Worries, fears, and anxiety about safety of self and others, including pets.
 - Adolescents may be particularly worried about friends
 - Adolescents may worry about entering a (new) high school, making new friends, and coping with the questions that are likely to come about their event experience
 - Adolescents may be worried about reconnecting with extracurricular activities (sports, dance, band, music, cheer, etc)
 - Adolescents with an eye toward college may be concerned about how this may impact their future
 - Adolescents may worry about how to respond to questions from others about the event
- Worries about re-occurrence or repercussions of the event or disasters.
- Changes in behavior:
 - Withdrawal
 - Irritability with friends, teachers, events
 - Anger outbursts and/or aggression
 - Changes in academic performance (generally a brief decline)
 - Decrease in attention and concentration
 - Increase in hyperactivity
 - Absenteeism is a risk for adolescents
- Discomfort with feelings, particularly feelings of vulnerability
- Increased risk for risky behaviors including substance abuse, drinking, reckless driving, promiscuity
- Repeated discussion of events and reviewing of details
- Negative impact on issues of trust and perceptions of others
- Increased sensitivity to sounds similar to those of the event or unpredictable noises
- Repetitive thoughts and comments about death or dying (including suicidal thoughts)
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities (e.g., after-school activities, time with friends)
- Increased negative behaviors (e.g., defiance) or emotions (e.g., sadness, fears, anger, worries)
- Denial of impact and a false bravado

What Can I Do To Help? Guidelines for Parents/Caregivers of High School Youth

- Reinforce ideas of safety and security, even though many adolescents will not verbalize worries or fears around these issues. This may be needed multiple times, particularly in response to changes or events reminding them of the crisis or trauma and its aftermath. After any discussion of the event, end the discussion with a focus on their current safety and a calming activity, such as having a moment of quiet reflection, listening to music, playing a computer game, etc.
- Listen to and tolerate your adolescents retelling of events. However, set limits on scary or hurtful talk.
- Encourage older adolescents to talk about confusing feelings, worries, daydreams, and disruptions of concentration by accepting feelings, listening carefully, and reminding students that these are normal reactions following a very traumatic event.
- Discuss adolescents' perceptions of media coverage of events. Encourage discussion of their opinions and ideas.
- Some adolescents will often think about the events at unpredictable times throughout the day. As they try to develop an understanding for what has happened, they may ask questions that are initially upsetting to adults, including questions that have gruesome details. Try to respond in a calm manner, answering the questions in simple, direct terms. Give them time to take in new information. Acknowledge their opinions and ideas.
- Maintain the family routines, particularly around sleeping and eating and extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, church, and dance). Make sure your teen is receiving a balanced diet and enough rest. Extra time with friends who are supportive and meaningful to him/her may be needed.
- Maintain expectations. These include expectations about behaviors and respect for others.
- All children will often misunderstand the information about the event as they are trying to make sense about what happened. In discussions, if this becomes apparent, gently help them develop a realistic understanding of the event.
- Expect some angry outbursts from your adolescents. Try to catch adolescents before they "act out", taking them aside, helping them calm down and regain control of their behavior. In addition, redirect siblings who are being irritable with each other which could escalate to direct conflict.
- Do activities that will reinforce the message that one person can make a difference to help and to heal. For example, after a disaster, activities may include donating clothes for disaster relief, organizing a school supplies drive for displaced students, and, importantly, helping displaced adolescents feel more a part of the new school they are attending. When children help others, they recover and cope better.
- Expect some brief (temporary) decline in adolescents' school performance.
- Provide reassurance to your adolescents that the uncomfortable feelings will get smaller and easier to handle over time.
- Maintain communication with others in your high schooler's life (teacher, coach, etc.). Monitor how they are coping with the demands of school, home, and community activities. Should difficulties coping with the event persist and interfere with their functioning, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. In addition to helping those who are clearly angry or depressed, monitor students who are withdrawn and isolated from others.
- Remain aware of your own reactions to your adolescent's handling of the event, as well as your own reactions to the trauma. It is okay to express emotions to your adolescents, such as "I am feeling

sad about what happened." However, if you are feeling overwhelmed with emotion, it is important to take care of yourself and to seek support from other adults, not your child.

- Avoid exposing you teen to reminders of the trauma. This includes monitoring your teen's exposure to the news and other television programs about the tragedy. When you can, watch it with your teen, and talk to your teen after to clarify their understanding of the events and the images seen. Be aware that your teens are often listening when adults are discussing the events. Protect your teen from re-exposure includes limiting exposure to adult conversations, however, find time to include them in age appropriate discussions about the events and resulting thoughts and feelings.
- Avoid unnecessary separations from important caregivers.
- Provide soothing activities, such as reading books, listening to music, taking a walk, riding bikes, etc. Some high school students benefit from writing their thoughts and feelings in a journal or drawing. Monitor social networking sites such as Facebook for concerning thoughts such as suicidal ideation.
- Address acting-out involving aggression or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly with limit setting. Monitor comments about death and dying or suicidal thoughts. If these behaviors are present, seek professionals help.
- Encourage your teen to delay making big decisions.
- For displaced children, investigate resources to allow a return to activities they previously enjoyed.
- For displaced children, talk with them about how they would like to handle questions from new friends about their event experience. Provide ideas that may help.
- Increase patience with your teen and with yourself. Give your family time to cope. **Find ways to emphasize to your teens that you love them.**

Important Information for Caregivers to Remember

- Be a role model. Your children will be looking to you to see how to handle this recent tragedy. When you remain calm, they will be less stressed by the event.
 - If you have been personally touched by the event, stress will be especially high. Use adult support systems to talk about the event, become emotional and vent your feelings. Monitor this in the presence of your children—they will take their cues from you.
- Take care of yourself. Get rest, exercise, and eat appropriately. When you are at your best, you can better respond to the needs of your children.
- Take a break. It will be important not to overwhelm yourself with event-related activities. Find a way to have some "downtime" to regroup.
- Put off making any major decisions when you are stressed by the aftermath of the event.
- Keep an optimistic outlook, keep hopeful. Even in the aftermath of such a tremendous tragedy, it is important to look for the positives (even small ones) and stay hopeful about the future. Your children will take this view from you as they cope with the aftermath.
- Ask for help. If you need information about activities for your children, faith and cultural support systems, or emotional support, remember, these are available in every community. For example, schools are an important resource for information. After a disaster, the local Red Cross chapter may also have information.