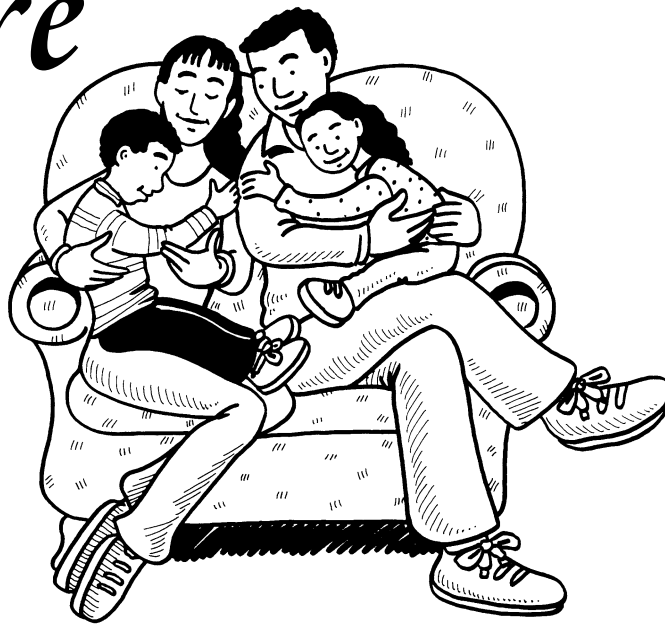


Helping children feel *safe and secure*

When tragedy strikes, young children need the help and support of their parents more than ever. Even though little ones may not understand the specifics of a crisis, they can pick up on the feelings of the adults in their lives. If their parents or teachers are sad and upset, they are likely to feel sad and upset, too.

Whether a tragedy is national, local, or personal, it's important to provide comfort and reassurance to youngsters. To help guide you, we've put together a list of ideas for leading your family through tough times.



Reassure children. Tell your youngsters that you love them and will take care of them. Let them know they are safe—and that you and everyone they know will help keep them safe.

Spend time with them. Talk with your children, hold them, and hug them. Give them lots of smiles. Extra cuddling at bedtime may help, too. If you have to be away, show them on the clock what time you'll be home. If they are with a babysitter or neighbor, call so they can hear your voice.

Be calm. Youngsters take their cues from you. Naturally, you will be upset in a crisis. But try not to be too upset around your children.

Maintain normal routines.

Stick with regular meal, homework, and bedtime schedules. Keeping activities as normal as possible will help your youngsters feel more secure.



Explain what happened.

Be honest with your children about the event—but remember, at this age they need only simple explanations.

Listen to them. Even young children need to share their feelings and fears. Listen to their concerns, stories, and worries. Resist the urge to say, "There's nothing to be afraid of." Instead, tell them about times you were afraid when you were their age and how you handled it.

Keep the television off. Pictures on television news can simply be too frightening for little ones. Also, repeating images can make children think that the event is happening again and again. Turn off the television when youngsters are around. In the car, keep the radio turned to music rather than news.

Give them power. Small things can make children feel in charge. Let them use a flashlight if a dark hallway frightens them or a night-light to brighten a dark bedroom. Being able to create a loud noise and make the noise stop may also help them feel they have control over their environment. *Examples:* turning the vacuum cleaner on and off, singing loudly.



Let your youngsters draw. Provide them with paper and crayons. Children this age can feel better by drawing pictures of what's bothering them. Ask them to describe their pictures to you.

continued



Additional resources

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children website has links for helping children cope with trauma. naeyc.org, 800-424-2460
- The website of the National Association of School Psychologists has articles and tips parents can use to help their youngsters. nasponline.org, 866-331-NASP
- The National Education Association Health Information Network website offers guidelines on talking with children and watching television during times of tragedy. crisisguide.neahin.org/crisisguide/tools/p3_2.html, 202-822-7570
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has advice for parents and resources for children who need extra help. samhsa.gov/MentalHealth/Tips_Talking_to_Children_After_Disaster.pdf, 877-SAMHSA-7

Talk about helpers. This is a good time to discuss the helpers in your community. Discuss the work being done by police, firefighters, rescue workers, doctors, and nurses to keep everyone healthy and safe.

Keep the arts alive. The arts can be a great healer because they soothe and provide joy. Play music in your house. Sing songs together. Watch a fun movie. Go to a puppet show or a concert.

Go outside. Take a walk, or have a picnic. Or just find a quiet place to sit outside. Being a part of nature brings on peaceful feelings for children and adults alike.

Set up a “family giving fund.” Explain how families in a crisis might need money. Then, make a bank using an empty oatmeal container. Start your family fund by putting your loose change in the bank every night. *Another idea:* Help your youngsters make cookies for local police officers or cards for sick or injured people.

Focus on play. Give your children lots of opportunities for play. Try calm activities, such as playing with sand, water, or clay. Encourage them to do pretend play. They may act out their feelings with action figures or imagine they are firefighters and doctors who are helping people.

Review emergency plans. Go over escape routes, and practice fire drills. Be sure your youngsters know whom they should call or go to in an emergency. Keep emergency numbers posted by the phone. Children may feel less anxious and gain a sense of control over events when you discuss or rehearse emergency plans.

Get together with friends and family. Make sure your children continue playing with friends. Join other families for dinner or an outing. Visit relatives who live nearby. This helps remind youngsters that lots of people love and care about them.

Have some fun. Play in the park. Ride bikes. Go swimming. These kinds of activities can help everyone get their minds off the crisis. And physical activity gives children and adults an emotional release.

Give peace a chance. Provide your youngsters with tools for handling their own conflicts peacefully. *Examples:* Role-play to show them ways to solve problems. Encourage them to use words, not hands, when they’re upset. Create a peaceful environment in your home by speaking politely to each other and treating everyone with respect.



Take care of yourself. Your children need you more than ever during times of crisis. Be kind to yourself—eat well, exercise, get enough rest, and take time for yourself. The better shape you’re in, the better shape your youngsters will be in.

Editor’s Note: Are your children having trouble sleeping, or are they sleeping too much? Do they want to sleep in your bed? Are they eating too much or hardly at all? Are they reverting to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting behaviors? Are they afraid to go outside? If these kinds of problems persist, talk to your pediatrician. They may be signs that your youngsters need extra help recovering from the stress brought on by crisis.

Early Years