

CHILDREN'S RESPONSE TO TRAUMA

Children's responses to trauma vary according to the age of the child. Generally, children respond by reverting to behavior typical of an earlier developmental stage. They express their vulnerability by more "baby-like" behavior. These responses are considered **NORMAL if they are of brief (less than three weeks) duration. If any of these symptoms continue longer, consult a professional, such as your doctor or the EAP at (808)(U) 831-5000.**

AGES 1-6	AGES 7 - 11	AGES 12 – 18
Bedwetting	Bedwetting	Withdrawal and isolation
Crying	Nightmares	Headaches
Immobility	Change in sleep patterns	Stomach pains
Excessive clinging	- unwilling to fall asleep	Running away
Thumbsucking	- need for night light	Depression and sadness
Wetting pants	- fear of sleeping alone	Suicidal thoughts *
Loss of bowel control	- fear of darkness	Stealing
Fear of darkness	Irrational fears	Change – sleep patterns
Inattentiveness	Irritability	Sleeplessness
Fear of animal	Disobedience	School problems
Fear of being left alone	Excessive clinging	Nightmares
Fear of crowds	Headaches	Increased sleeping
Overactivity	Stomach aches	Confusion
Underactivity	Visual / hearing problems	Violent fantasies
Nightmares	Refusal to go to school	Avoiding talking about it
Inability to sleep without a light on	Poor performance	Delinquent behavior
Wanting to sleep with someone else	Fighting	Use of drugs
Waking during night	Loss of interest	Use of alcohol
Sensitivity to noises	Loss of concentration	Sexual acting out
Irritability – fussiness	Distractibility	Accident prone *
Confusion	Withdrawal	Relationship difficulties
Speech difficulties	Refusal to talk about event	Change in appetite
Eating problems	Violent fantasies / play	Aggressiveness
Stomach aches	Re-enacting the event	Risk taking behavior *
Accident prone *	Accident prone *	Inappropriate humor
Violent fantasies/play	Appetite disturbances	Overactivity
Re-enacting event	Over/underactivity	Underactivity
Wanting to die *	Inattentiveness	Irritability
Wishing to be with loved one / go to heaven *	Wanting to die *	Confusion
		Inattentiveness

*** Any suicidal or self-destructive talk or actions should be taken seriously and professional help should be sought immediately. Children and even adolescents do not fully understand the permanence of death, and so do not understand the consequences of "suicidal" behavior. Even very young children can become suicidal.**

(OVER)

COPING WITH CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Although children have many of the same reactions as adults do to stress and trauma, they have different ways of expressing their emotions and usually will need special support and help to cope. Here are some suggestions for supporting your child in crisis.

- When disaster hits a family, the child often must struggle not only with the event itself but with the unavailability of parents who may themselves be impacted by trauma. Since one of a child's biggest fears is the loss of unavailability of parents, the fearfulness of having parents distracted and preoccupied with their own upset can itself become a disaster.
- Your child's fears are real to him. He's not trying to make life difficult for you: he is truly afraid. Treat all fears as genuine.
- Your child needs a lot of reassurance that you will take care of him. Keep on giving it.
- Keep all promises you make to your child during the crisis. Do not make a promise you cannot keep. He must know he can count on you when all else is in chaos.
- Limit - and monitor - your child's exposure to media coverage. Talk about it with them. Explain the facts you know about the disaster. You may have to explain more than once. If you don't know something, say so.
- Listen to your child. Listen to his fears. Listen to how he feels. Listen to his explanation about what he thinks happened. Listen to what he thinks should be done about it.
- Tell the truth. Don't make things up. Even if you are leaving out details you feel are too advanced for your child, what you tell him should be the truth. Avoid adding your political or value judgements.
- Encourage your child to talk. If they're not ready, let them know you want to hear it whenever they are.
- Encourage your child to draw pictures of the disaster or re-enact it with toys or in play. This can be very disturbing to adults, but it can help children because they lack verbal skills for expressing complicated thoughts and emotions. Drawing and playing are other ways of "talking" about an event. Help them talk about the drawing or the toys...ask them about how the toys feel or what happens in the drawings. Through these they can express how they feel and what they think happened. Make up bedtime stories with them about the event.
- Include your child in chores and in any cleanup or other activities that help return life to normal. He'll feel more in control if he can help. So will you.
- Maintain your routine as much as possible. Make sure to observe any family rituals, such as at bedtime. This shows your child some things have not changed completely.
- Young children need to be held. All children need to be touched.
- Expect to be more flexible at bedtime. A child may need you to stay while they fall asleep, or may want a night light, or to sleep with you or a sibling. If you allow him to sleep with you, you should agree on a time (not more than 3-4 days) when he will return to his own bed. Ask your child what he needs from you to make being in his own bed easier.
- If your child is fearful of going to school, insist that he go, but accompany him. Let teachers and school counselors know your child is in crisis: they can frequently be of great help.
- Sharing your feelings about the disaster with your child can be helpful, if you keep it simple. Telling your child you are scared or sad too helps him feel better about his own responses. However, it's best not to share fears about your ability to cope, or of being overwhelmed. Confidence that both of you will cope, even if scared or sad, is important.
- Do not expect your child to take care of your fears. For instance don't keep a child home or have him sleep with you because you are afraid to be separated from him. Rather than burden your child with worrying about you, find appropriate help for yourself to cope.
- Do not tell a child a deceased person is "asleep" or "in heaven with God or Jesus". Children don't have the mental development to understand this, and may be afraid to sleep or even try to die themselves.
- Try to find a special time each day to be together as a family. This is always a good idea, but especially important in times of crisis. Have some fun together.