

Tip Sheet for Parents

Helping Children Cope

Whenever a national tragedy occurs, such as violence in schools, terrorist attacks or natural disasters, children, like many people, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

Parents and Teachers Should:

- 1. Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
- 2. Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help ensure their immediate safety and that of their community.
- 3. Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that the government emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, and the military are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.
- 4. Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
- 5. Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
- 6. Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or have special needs may be at greater risk for severe



reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

7. Tell children the truth. Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

8. Stick to the facts. Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

9. Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Upper middle school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

10. Monitor your own stress level. Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition and exercise.

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