

## **HELPING PARENTS HELP THEIR CHILDREN: INFORMATION ABOUT COPING WITH TRAUMA**

1. Why traumas affect us so profoundly is that they shatter our assumptions that the world is a safe and fair place, that there is always some kind of meaning in life events, and if we are smart and responsible enough, we can protect ourselves and our children from tragedy.
2. Recovery from trauma means being able to put the experience behind us. For children, this means getting back to the business of being children as soon as possible, and anything adults can do to provide an environment where kids can continue to be kids is helpful in trauma resolutions.
3. Children often view traumas in a different way than adults do. They lack the ability to appreciate the longer-range implications of an event, especially if it was a community trauma and their own family was not personally touched. Their view of the trauma is often based on how they see the adults who are close to them responding. Younger children may be more alarmed if the adults in their life seem very upset and emotional. Conversely, children may be less impacted if the adults in their lives are calm. Reassuring and supportive.
4. Children's reactions to trauma are as individual and different as one child is from another. Some children may have big reactions to small events while others may seem to react minimally to terrible things. There is no one right way to respond!
5. That children seem to recover from a traumatic event more quickly than adults is often a reflection of their ability to focus on the immediate present rather than on the past or future. Especially if they were not personally touched by the event or witnesses to it, they may be able to put it behind them and move on with their lives in a remarkably short period of time.
6. Another reason children may seem to underreact to a traumatic event is that they can only tolerate intense feelings for a short period of time. So they experience the upsetting feelings for a brief period of time, then back away from them until they can tolerate the intensity again. So what may look like denial or avoidance to us is really an example of effective coping. Parents need to take advantage of opportunities to talk about the trauma when their children present them.
7. External events may reactivate the trauma. For example, Halloween with its scary themes may bring back the fear related to a recent trauma like homicide. Young children who used to enjoy the holiday may be reluctant to participate in trick or treating, and parents might do well to come up with alternative activities that are less anxiety provoking. Likewise, t.v. shows with similar themes to the trauma may also cause distress or actual real-life events that are similar will most likely serve as reminders of the original trauma. Media attention can also replay a

trauma for both children and adults. Especially during court proceedings, the media tends to replay the original event daily to remind us of any details we may have forgotten. Being prepared for these reminders, whatever their source, is the best way to cope with them.

8. Dealing with trauma is not something most of us have experience with – it's not a "normal" parenting skill. So if you are concerned about your child's reaction or lack thereof, a good way to deal with your uncertainty is to check it out with someone whose opinion you trust. Your school counselor is a good resource as is your local mental health agency or clinic.
9. While traumas are by definition upsetting, our response to them is what makes them manageable. When events in life seem out of control, the fact that we can still control our reactions to them sends an important message to our children. Remaining in emotional control also helps us develop more effective problem-solving strategies to protect ourselves as best we can from similar catastrophes.