



# Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

A recovery guide for parents, teachers  
and community leaders



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## About this guide

Dear Parents and Teachers,

In the wake of a traumatic event, you may be filled with worry or sadness. Yet no matter how concerned or overwhelmed you may feel, as parents and teachers you have the power to help children recover. Your comfort, support and reassurance can make them feel safe and secure, guide them through their fears and grief, and prevent them from suffering lasting psychological effects.

This guide was assembled by psychiatrists, psychologists, and mental health experts who specialize in crisis situations. It offers simple tips on what to expect, what to do, and what to look out for. There are general suggestions as well as age-specific information. If you or your children require assistance from a mental health professional, do not hesitate to ask a doctor or other health care provider for a recommendation.

Best,



**Harold S. Koplewicz, MD**  
President, Child Mind Institute



## Helpful tips for children of any age

- **Make your child feel safe.** All children, from toddlers to teens, will benefit from your touch—extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. It gives them a feeling of security, which is so important in the aftermath of a frightening or disturbing event. For specific information on what to do and say, see the age-by-age-guide.
- **Act calm.** Children look to adults for reassurance after traumatic events have occurred. Do not discuss your anxieties with your children, or when they are around, and be aware of the tone of your voice, as children quickly pick up on anxiety.
- **Maintain routines as much as possible.** Amidst chaos and change, routines reassure children that life will be OK again. Try to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or temporarily relocated, establish new routines. And stick with the same family rules, such as ones about good behavior.
- **Help children enjoy themselves.** Encourage kids to do activities and play with others. The distraction is good for them, and gives them a sense of normalcy.
- **Share information about what happened.** It's always best to learn the details of a traumatic event from a safe, trusted adult. Be brief, honest, and allow children to ask questions. Don't presume kids are worrying about the same things as adults.
- **Pick good times to talk.** Look for natural openings to have a discussion.

- **Prevent or limit exposure to news coverage.** This is especially critical with toddlers and school-age children, as seeing disturbing events recounted on TV or in the newspaper or listening to them on the radio can make them seem to be ongoing. Children who believe bad events are temporary can more quickly recover from them.
- **Understand that children cope in different ways.** Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Let your child know it is normal to experience anger, guilt and sadness, and to express things in different ways—for example, a person may feel sad but not cry.
- **Listen well.** It is important to understand how your child views the situation, and what is confusing or troubling to him or her. Do not lecture—just be understanding. Let kids know it is OK to tell you how they are feeling at any time.
- **Acknowledge what your child is feeling.** If a child admits to a concern, do not respond, “Oh, don’t be worried,” because he may feel embarrassed or criticized. Simply confirm what you are hearing: “Yes, I can see that you are worried.”
- **Know that it’s okay to answer, “I don’t know.”** What children need most is someone whom they trust to listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don’t worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say—after all, there is no answer that will make everything okay.
- **Realize the questions may persist.** Because the aftermath of a disaster may include constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Let them know you are ready to talk at any time. Children need to digest information on their own timetable and questions might come out of nowhere.
- **Encourage family discussions about the death of a loved one.** When families can talk and feel sad together, it’s more likely that kids will share their feelings.
- **Do not give children too much responsibility.** It is very important not to overburden kids with tasks, or give them adult ones, as this can be too stressful for them. Instead, for the near future you should lower expectations for household duties and school demands, although it is good to have them do at least some chores.
- **Give special help to kids with special needs.** These children may require more time, support and guidance than other children. You might need to simplify the language you use, and repeat things very often. You may also need to tailor information to your child’s strength; for instance, a child with language disability may better understand information through the use of visual materials or other means of communication you are used to.

- **Help children relax with breathing exercises.** Breathing becomes shallow when anxiety sets in; deep belly breaths can help children calm down. You can hold a feather or a wad of cotton in front of your child’s mouth and ask him to blow at it, exhaling slowly. Or you can say, “Let’s breathe in slowly while I count to three, then breathe out while I count to three.” Place a stuffed animal or pillow on your child’s belly as he lies down and ask him to breathe in and out slowly and watch the stuffed animal or pillow rise and fall.
- **Watch for signs of trauma.** Within the first month after a disaster it is common for kids to seem mostly okay. After that, the numbness wears off and kids might experience more symptoms—especially children who have witnessed injuries or death, lost immediate family members, experienced previous trauma in their lives or who are not resettled in a new home.
- **Know when to seek help.** Although anxiety and other issues may last for months, seek immediate help from your family doctor or from a mental health professional if they do not abate or your child starts to hear voices, sees things that are not there, becomes paranoid, experiences panic attacks, or has thoughts of wanting to harm himself or other people.
- **Take care of yourself.** You can best help your child when you help yourself. Talk about concerns with friends and relatives; it might be helpful to form a support group. If you belong to a church or community group, keep participating. Try to eat right, drink enough water, stick to exercise routines, and get enough sleep. Physical health protects against emotional vulnerability. To reduce stress, do deep breathing. If you suffer from severe anxiety that interferes with your ability to function, seek help from a doctor or mental health professional and if you don’t have access to one, talk with a religious leader. Recognize your need for help and get it. Do it for your child’s sake, if for no other reason.

### Signs of Trauma

- **Constantly replaying the event in their minds**
- **Nightmares**
- **Beliefs that the world is generally unsafe**
- **Irritability, anger and moodiness**
- **Poor concentration**
- **Appetite or sleep issues**
- **Behavior problems**
- **Nervousness about people getting too close**
- **Jumpiness from loud noises**
- **Regression to earlier behavior in young children, such as: clinging, bed-wetting or thumb-sucking**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- **Detachment or withdrawal from others**
- **Use of alcohol or drugs in teens**
- **Functional impairment: Inability to go to school, learn, play with friends, etc.**



## AGE-BY-AGE GUIDE

### How to help children ages 0-2

Infants sense your emotions, and react accordingly. If you are calm, your baby will feel secure. If you act anxious and overwhelmed, your baby may react with fussing, have trouble being soothed, eat or sleep irregularly or may act withdrawn.

#### What you can do

- **Try your best to act calm.** Even if you are feeling stressed or anxious, talk to your baby in a soothing voice.
- **Respond consistently to your baby’s needs.** The developmental task of this age is to trust care-givers so kids can develop a strong, healthy attachment.
- **Continue nursing if you have been breastfeeding.** Although there is a myth that when a mother experiences shock her breast milk turns bad and could cause the baby to be “slow” or have learning disorders, that is not true. It is important to continue nursing your baby to keep her healthy and connected with you. You need to stay healthy to breastfeed, so do your best to eat enough and drink water.
- **Look into your baby’s eyes.** Smile at her. Touch her. Research shows that eye contact, touch and simply being in a mother’s presence helps keep a baby’s emotions balanced.

## How to help children ages 2-5

At this age, although children are making big developmental advances, they still depend on parents to nurture them. As with babies, they typically respond to situations according to how parents react. If you are calm and confident, your child will feel more secure. If you act anxious or overwhelmed, your child may feel unsafe.

### Typical reactions of children ages 2 to 5:

- **Talking repeatedly about the event or pretending to “play” the event**
- **Tantrums or irritable outbursts**
- **Crying and tearfulness**
- **Increased fearfulness—often of the dark, monsters, or being alone**
- **Increased sensitivity to sounds like thunder, wind, and other loud noises**
- **Disturbances in eating, sleeping, and toileting**
- **Believing that the disaster can be undone**
- **Excessive clinging to caregivers and trouble separating**
- **Reverting to early behavior like baby talk, bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking**

### What you can do:

- **Make your child feel safe.** Hold, hug and cuddle your child as much as possible. Tell her you will take care of her when she feels sad or scared. With children who are learning to talk, use simple phrases such as “Mommy’s here.”
- **Watch what you say.** Little children have big ears and may pick up on your anxiety, misinterpret what they hear, or be frightened unnecessarily by things they do not understand.
- **Maintain routines as much as possible.** No matter what your living situation, do your best to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or have been relocated, create new routines. Try to do the things you have always done with your children, such as singing songs or saying prayers before they go to sleep.
- **Give extra support at bedtime.** Children who have been through trauma may become anxious at night. When you put your child to bed, spend more time than usual talking or telling stories. It’s okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.
- **Do not expose kids to the news.** Young children tend to confuse facts with fears. They may not realize that the images they see on the news aren’t happening again and again. They should also not listen to the radio.

- **Encourage children to share feelings.** Try a simple question such as, “How are you feeling today?” Follow any conversations about the recent event with a favorite story or a family activity to help kids feel more safe and calm.
- **Enable your child to tell the story of what happened.** This will help her make sense of the event and cope with her feelings. Play can often be used to help your child frame the story and tell you about the event in her own words.
- **Draw pictures.** Young children often do well expressing emotions with drawing. This is another opportunity to provide explanations and reassurance. To start a discussion, you may comment on what a child has drawn.
- **If your child acts out it may be a sign she needs extra attention.** Help her name how she feels: Scared? Angry? Sad? Let her know it is okay to feel that way, then show her the right way to behave—you can say, “It’s okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit your sister.”
- **Get kids involved in activities.** Distraction is a good thing for kids at this age. Play games with them, and arrange for playtime with other kids.
- **Talk about things that are going well.** Even in the most trying times, it’s important to identify something positive and express hope for the future to help your child recover. You can say something like, “We still have each other. I am here with you, and I will stay with you.” Pointing out the good will help you feel better, too.

### To help kids ages 2 to 5 cope with the death of a loved one:

- **Speak to them at their level.** Use similar experiences to help children understand, such as the death of a pet or changes in flowers in the garden.
- **Provide simple explanations.** For example, “When someone dies, we can’t see them anymore but we can still look at them in pictures and remember them.”
- **Reassure your children.** They might feel what happened is their fault, somehow; let them know it is not.
- **Expect repeated questions.** That is how young children process information.

## How to help children ages 6-11

At this age, children are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings and can better handle difficulties, but they still look to parents for comfort and guidance. Listening to them demonstrates your commitment. When scary things happen, seeing that parents can still parent may be the most reassuring thing for a frightened child.

### Typical reactions of children ages 6 to 11:

- **Anxiety**
- **Increased aggression, anger and irritability (like bullying or fighting with peers)**
- **Sleep and appetite disturbances**
- **Blaming themselves for the event**
- **Moodiness or crying**
- **Concerns about being taken care of**
- **Fear of future injury or death of loved ones**
- **Denying the event even occurred**
- **Complaints about physical discomfort, such as stomachaches, headaches, and lethargy, which may be due to stress**
- **Repeatedly asking questions**
- **Refusing to discuss the event (more typical among kids ages 9 to 11)**
- **Withdrawal from social interactions**
- **Academic problems: Trouble with memory and concentration at school, refusing to attend**

### What you can do to help your child:

- **Reassure your child that he is safe.** Children this age are comforted by facts. Use real words, such as hurricane, earthquake, flood, aftershock. For kids this age, knowledge is empowering and helps relieve anxiety.
- **Keep things as “normal” as possible.** Bedtime and mealtime routines help kids feel safe and secure. If you are homeless or have been relocated, establish different routines and give your child some choice in the matter—for example, let her choose which story to tell at bedtime. This gives a child a sense of control during an uncertain time.
- **Limit exposure to TV, newspapers and radio.** The more bad news school-age kids are exposed to, the more worried they will be. News footage can magnify the trauma of the event, so when a child does watch a news report or listen to the radio, sit with him so you can talk about it afterward. Avoid letting your child see graphic images.

- **Spend time talking with your child.** Let him know that it is okay to ask questions and to express concerns or sadness. One way to encourage conversation is to use family time (such as mealtime) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Also ask what his friends have been saying, so you can make sure to correct any misinformation.
- **Answer questions briefly but honestly.** After a child has brought something up, first ask for his ideas so you can understand exactly what the concern is. Usually children ask a question because they are worried about something specific. Give a reassuring answer. If you do not know an answer to a question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know.” Do not speculate or repeat rumors.
- **Draw out children who do not talk.** Open a discussion by sharing your own feelings—for example, you could say, “This was a very scary thing, and sometimes I wake up in the night because I am thinking about it. How are you feeling?” Doing this helps your child feel he is not alone in his concerns or fears. However, do not give a lot of detail about your own anxieties.
- **Keep children busy.** Daily activities, such as playing with friends or going to school, may have been disrupted. Help kids think of alternative activities and organize playgroups with other parents.
- **Calm worries about friends’ safety.** Reassure your children that their friends’ parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.
- **Talk about community recovery.** Let children know that things are being done to keep them safe, or restore electricity and water, and that government and community groups are helping, if applicable.
- **Encourage kids to lend a hand.** This will give them a sense of accomplishment and purpose at a time when they may feel helpless. Younger children can do small tasks for you; older ones can contribute to volunteer projects in the community.
- **Find the hope.** Children need to see the future to recover. Kids this age appreciate specifics. For example, in the event of a natural disaster, you could say: “People from all over the country are sending medical supplies, food, and water. They’ve built new places where people who are hurt will be taken care of, and they will build new homes. It’ll be very hard like this only for just a little while.”

### To help kids ages 6 to 11 cope with the death of a loved one:

- **Find out what your child is thinking.** Ask questions before you make assumptions about what your child wants to know. For example, you can say, “It made me so upset when grandma died. What about you? It’s hard to think about, isn’t it?”
- **Use real words.** Avoid euphemisms for death like “He went to a better place.” School-age children are easily confused by vague answers. Instead, you can say, “Grandma has died, she is not coming back, and it is okay to feel sad about that.”
- **Be as concrete as possible.** Use simple drawings to describe things such as the body and injuries.
- **Inform your child.** Let her know that anger and sadness are typical, and that if she avoids feelings she may feel worse later on.
- **Prepare the child for anticipated changes in routines or household functions.** Talk about what the changes will mean for her.
- **Reassure your child.** Help her understand it is okay, and normal, to have trouble with school, peers, and family during this time.
- **Encourage meaningful memorializing.** Pray together as a family and take your child with you to church to light a candle. Your child might also want to write a letter to the deceased person or draw a picture you can hang up.
- **Be patient.** Kids up to age 11 may think death is reversible, and can have trouble accepting the fact that the person may not return. You might need to say repeatedly, “He died and is not coming back, and I am sad.”



### How to help children ages 12-18

Adolescence is already a challenging time for young people, who have so many changes happening in their bodies. They struggle with wanting more independence from parents, and have a tendency to feel nothing can harm them. Traumatic events can make them feel out of control, even if they act as if they are strong. They will also feel bad for people affected by the disaster, and have a strong desire to know why the event occurred.

#### Typical reactions of children ages 12 to 18:

- **Avoidance of feelings**
- **Constant rumination about the disaster**
- **Distancing themselves from friends and family**
- **Anger or resentment**
- **Depression, and perhaps expression of suicidal thoughts**
- **Panic and anxiety, including worrying about the future**
- **Mood swings and irritability**
- **Changes in appetite and/or sleep habits**
- **Academic issues, such as trouble with memory and concentration, and/or refusing to attend school**
- **Participation in risky or illegal behavior, like drinking alcohol**

#### What you can do:

- **Make your teen feel safe again.** Adolescents do not like to show vulnerability; they may try to act as if they are doing fine even though they are not. While they may resist hugs, your touch can help them feel secure. You can say something like, “I know you’re grown now, but I just need to give you a hug.”

- **Help teens feel helpful.** Give them small tasks and responsibilities in the household, then praise them for what they have done and how they have handled themselves. Do not overburden teens with too many responsibilities, especially adult-like ones, as that will add to their anxiety.
- **Open the door for discussion.** It's very typical for teens to say they don't want to talk. Try to start a conversation while you are doing an activity together, so that the conversation does not feel too intense or confrontational.
- **Consider peer groups.** Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers, so consider organizing one. Also encourage conversation with other trusted adults, like a relative or teacher.
- **Limit exposure to TV, newspapers and radio.** While teens can better handle the news than younger kids, those who are unable to detach themselves from TV or the radio may be trying to deal with anxiety in unhealthy ways. In any case, talk with your teen about the things she has seen or heard.
- **Help your teen take action.** Kids this age will want to help the community. Find appropriate volunteer opportunities.
- **Be aware of substance abuse.** Teens are particularly at risk for turning to alcohol or drugs to numb their anxiety. If your teen has been behaving secretly or is seemingly drunk or high, get in touch with a doctor. And talk to your teen in a kind way. For example, "People often drink or use drugs after a disaster to calm themselves or forget, but it can also cause more problems. Some other things you can do are take a walk, talk to me or your friends about how you feel, or write about your hopes for a better future."

### How to help kids ages 12 to 18 cope with the death of a loved one:

- **Be patient.** Teens may have a fear of expressing emotions about death. Encourage them to talk by saying something like, "I know it is horrible that grandma has died. Experts say it's good to share our feelings. How are you doing?"
- **Be very open.** Discuss the ways you feel the death may be influencing her behavior.
- **Be flexible.** It is okay, at this time, to have a little more flexibility with rules and academic and behavioral expectations.
- **Memorialize meaningfully.** Pray together at home, let your teen light a candle at church, and include her in memorial ceremonies. She might also appreciate doing a private family tribute at home.



### What teachers can do to help students

- **Resume routine as much as possible.** Children tend to function better when they know what to expect. Returning to a school routine will help students feel that the troubling events have not taken control over every aspect of their daily lives.
- **Maintain expectations of students.** It doesn't need to be 100%, but needing to do some homework and simple classroom tasks is very helpful.
- **Be aware of signs that a child may need extra help.** Students who are unable to function due to feelings of intense sadness, fear or anger should be referred to a mental health professional. Children may have distress that is manifested as physical ailments, such as headaches, stomachaches, or extreme fatigue.
- **Help kids understand more about what happened.** For example, you can mention the various kinds of help coming in, and provide positive coping ideas.
- **Consider a memorial.** Memorials are often helpful to commemorate people and things that were lost. School memorials should be kept brief and appropriate to the needs and age range of the general school community. Children under four may not have the attention span to join in. A known caregiver, friend, or relative should be the child's companion during funeral or memorial activities.
- **Reassure children that school officials are making sure they are safe.** Children's fears abate when they know that trusted adults are doing what they can to take care of them.
- **Stay in touch with parents.** Tell them about the school's programs and activities so they can be prepared for discussions that may continue at home. Encourage parents to limit their children's exposure to news reports.
- **Take care of yourself.** You may be so busy helping your students that you neglect yourself. Find ways for you and your colleagues to support one another.



The Child Mind Institute is an independent nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we're helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. We share all of our resources freely and do not accept any funding from the pharmaceutical industry.

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