

HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH CRISIS AND TRANSITIONS

Children can be impacted by the emotional effects of a disaster, such as earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and acts of war (just to name a few). Communities and families usually require large-scale assistance to cope with such events.

Children are also impacted by crises, and those most closely affected will be the most symptomatic. Crises include events such as suicides, unexpected death of community or family members, school shootings and other violent incidents. They require the assistance of caring and able adults to negotiate through the often intense thoughts and feelings in the aftermath of such events.

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from child to child. Children's reactions to a disaster are determined by their age, previous experiences, temperament and personality, and the immediacy of the disaster to their own lives. Changes in functioning may not show for weeks or even months.

Common Reactions

- Become more active and restless, or have difficulty concentrating.
- Become easily upset, OR become quiet and withdrawn, appear numb to their feelings, and not want to talk about the experience.
- Feel neglected by parents, or worried about parents' reactions.
- Become afraid of loud noises, storms, emergency vehicles or anything that might be associated with the disaster or crisis.
- Be afraid to be alone or to sleep alone. They may have nightmares and fears and want to sleep with a parent or caregiver.
- Behave as they did when younger; for example, thumb-sucking or other self-soothing methods.
- Re-experience the event through intense recollections, dreams, flashbacks.
- Have somatic symptoms of illness such as upset stomach, vomiting, headaches, and poor appetite.
- Refuse to go to school or to daycare; or have difficulty with schoolwork.
- Be angry. They may hit, throw, kick (uncharacteristically).
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behaviour, wish or thought.
- Be afraid that the crisis may recur. They may ask many times: "Will it happen again?"

How to Help Children Cope with Crisis Situations

- Talk to the child and provide simple, accurate information to questions. Allow them to tell and draw their stories about what happened.
- Be honest. Don't deny the gravity of the situation. Saying to a child, "Don't cry, everything will be okay," does not reflect how the child feels.
- Reassure the child that caring adults will be present and able to be there.
- Use active listening skills. Try to recognize the underlying feelings in words and actions. For example: "I can see you are feeling really sad about what happened". This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- Understand they will repeat questions. You may need to provide information and reassurances many times.
- Provide play, art, music and movement experiences to express feelings. Use guided imagery to help create a vision for the future.
- Encourage parents to:
 - provide physical comfort
 - Spend extra time with their child when putting him or her to bed. Leave a night light on if necessary
 - Observe their child at play and listen for expressions of fear, anger or worry
 - Take care of themselves and get support when needed.
 - Plan something practical that the child can do to help (clean up or make meals for others; write a poem or draw a picture honouring a person who may have died).
 - Educate the child and family about the short- and long-term impacts of the trauma response and what others who have survived similar crises have experienced.

Transitions

Unlike crisis situations, adults can provide more opportunities to adjust to, and prepare for, common transitions for children. These include (but are not limited to): daycare, babysitting, preschool, kindergarten, school, moving, changes in family structure (including divorce, separation, siblings, blended families, extended family), death of grandparents or older relatives, death of pets, travel, medical procedures (including dental), and activities related to friends (sleepovers, parties).

How to Help Children Cope with Transitions

- Prepare, prepare, prepare! Give children age-appropriate, accurate information about what is going to happen.
- Use picture books, puppets, songs and rhymes to expose younger children to similar situations and stories that apply to the change they are undergoing.
- Use books, examples from television shows and movies, stories, and anecdotes to communicate with older children regarding the transition.
- Slow down and pay attention to what is happening for the child, and let them know change can be difficult to adjust to, even for adults.
- Take them to the unfamiliar places or settings they will be exposed to ahead of time, if possible.
- Do not over-react if the child takes a little longer to adjust, and help parents and caregivers to give the child the time they need.
- Adults in the child's environment should try to "be on the same page" as often as possible, minimizing conflicting messages.
- Allow them to communicate their fears and worries through expressive arts, play and movement.