



KEY POINTS ABOUT CHILDREN AND TRAUMA

- Adults want to protect their children, so they may tend to cut off expressions of difficult, painful or scary feelings and not spend sufficient time listening to their children.
- It is crucial for adults to experience their own feelings first and understand them, then to listen carefully to what children are saying in order to understand the feelings behind the words. By not responding too quickly, adults encourage their children to express their concerns and feelings.
- Separation anxiety, one of the scariest feelings, is the central issue for both children and adults. Think about what touches you most deeply about the news broadcasts. It tends to be stories of families separated by lack of housing, or children missing parents or siblings, or the threat of families being separated. We want to cling: we call relatives and friends often to reassure ourselves they are there.
- Lack of understanding is another kind of separation or abandonment. Children can be reassured by knowing they are listened to. They need to feel that their fears will be addressed and understood by adults. Sharing feelings is a crucial form of connection.

By taking a child's feelings seriously, the adult helps the child feel the world is a safer place.

- Adults should initiate discussion of the traumatic event and its aftermath. Younger children especially may not know how to talk about the traumatic event and may be afraid to bring it up. Adults may need to break the ice and to create an opportunity, an open door, for discussion. For instance, if your child is watching TV with you and there is an announcement about some aspect of recent trauma such as a hurricane, that is an opportunity to ask your child what they think or how they feel about the hurricane. Then it is

important to be quiet and **listen and attend**. Turn off the TV, and really pay attention to what your child is saying. Listen for clues that your child is ready to stop talking about it. Don't force it. If he/she changes the subject, rolls their eyes or gives other clues of decreased interest in the discussion, then stop. For children 8 and under, their concerns tend to be very concrete and it is best to respond to them on that level. If there is something you can reassure them about honestly, then by all means, give them reasons to reduce their anxiety.

- Because much of the news coverage is delivered very dispassionately and neutrally, it is important for parents to acknowledge and validate the variety of feelings which accompany a traumatic event. Children can get the impression from a news broadcast that the correct attitude is not to have feelings. They need to hear from parents, teachers and other adults that this is not the case.
- For all of us, the most painful and scary feelings are those feelings of helplessness. We all need to feel that there is some action we can take, either to manage our feelings, to affect public policy or to take care of others. Children have similar needs. They are reassured when they see their parents taking action such as going to a meeting, writing letters or doing whatever feels helpful. Children need suggestions for actions that they themselves might take. Talking, drawing, letter-writing, praying participating with parents in clean-up activities, as appropriate for their age, are all ways of doing something to counteract feelings of helplessness.