

Helping Your Child Cope

Terrorist attacks, acts of war, and sudden violent events such as disasters are upsetting for children, even if they only witness them on television or see their impact on the adults they care about. We need to remember that **it is normal for kids to feel worried, sad, nervous, and frightened in the face of such events.**

Parents, caregivers, family members, teachers and adults in general need to pay attention to children's feelings and reactions.

It is important for you as parents and caregivers to know that:

- You can help kids cope with their reactions.
- One of the most important steps you can take to help your children is to reassure them that they are safe, that you will protect them from danger, and that you will continue to help them when they feel afraid.
- These reactions are usually brief and soon disappear.
- How you handle the situation will strongly affect how your child will handle it.
- You can help better if you pay attention to your own feelings and reactions and take positive steps to care for yourself.

The following information will help you understand some common reactions of children following such a stressful event.

For The Young Child (1-6)

Young children are not as verbal as older children. They express themselves through conversations with adults and each other, self-talk, play, songs and drawings. Take time to listen to and observe your child. These activities are a window into their thoughts and feelings.

Here are some other ways they can show you how they feel:

- **Whining**
- **Bed wetting**
- **Thumb sucking**
- **Wanting to be held**
- **Clinging to caregivers**
- **Stomach aches**
- **Headaches**
- **Crying**
- **Eating problems**
- **Nightmares**
- **Sleeping problems**
- **Crankiness**

- **Tantrums**
- **Being stubborn**
- **Fear of the dark**
- **Being more agitated**

How you can help:

Do not be alarmed. These reactions are some of the ways children express anxiety or comfort themselves when they are upset. They are common signs of anxiety which are usually short-lived.

Do not overreact. If you punish or nag the child, his/her behaviors may last longer.

Spend extra time paying attention to your children. Help them feel understood and loved. Let your children know that you are not upset with their bed wetting, thumb sucking or nail biting. Reassure them that you know that it is only happening because they are upset.

Catch them being good. Praise for good behavior brings positive results.

Children who cling need to be reassured. Leave them when you must, but reassure them that you will be back.

Comfort and hold them. Children need physical closeness, holding, comforting, and reassurance. This helps them feel safe and secure.

Protect your child from further anxiety and fears by selecting TV programs suitable for their age range. Very young children need to be protected from frightening scenes because they are not old enough to understand the events. Be there to explain any war coverage they happen to see.

Spend more family time together. Children need their parents or familiar adults around them during and after a stressful event.

Maintain family routines. Mealtimes, visits with playmates and regular bedtime hours are comforting for the child. Familiar routines reinforce the child's sense of security.

Create an environment in which children feel safe enough to ask questions. Young children do not need detailed information about the events but they may need to talk about their feelings. Let your children know that they can ask questions. Ask them what they have heard and how they feel about it. Answer their questions honestly, but make sure the information is suitable to their age level. Remember also that they are listening when you talk to others about the events. Reassure them that people are doing everything they can to make things safe.

Kids have short attention spans. Talk to them for short periods of time, but do it often. Check in with them to see how they are doing.

Tell your children how you feel. Let them know it is okay to have feelings of fear, sadness or anger, and that there are healthy ways of expressing and coping with these feelings. This helps them feel less alone, and more free to talk about their own feelings. They are more secure knowing you can handle what is happening.

Problems at Bedtime

Problems encountered at bedtime are the ones most often mentioned by parents, during and following stressful events. Children may:

- Refuse to go to their room by themselves to sleep.
- Wake up scared, crying, or trembling from a renewed fear.
- Once awake, insist on sleeping with the parents or having someone remain near them.
- Be frightened by darkness, “monsters” or animals.

How parents can help:

Spend more time with your children when they are awake. This will help them feel more secure at night.

Encourage your children to exercise and participate in active games which will reduce their anxiety and drain their surplus of energy. Physical activities during the day will promote better sleep.

Establish a comforting routine at bedtime: a hot bath, quiet games, storytelling, singing lullabies, and taking a favorite plush toy to bed can all add to a child’s sense of security, comfort, and well-being.

Take the time to listen to your children. Bedtime often provides a special quiet time when children can ask questions, share anxieties and fears with their parents, and be reassured.

If your children leave their beds:

Bring them back gently to their room right away or after a few minutes of reassurance and snuggling. Reassure them of your presence, and whisper some comforting words such as “It’s O.K. I’m here. I love you. It’s time for bed now...” Stay with them longer than you usually do.

Some parents may want to let their children sleep with them for a night or two. It can be comforting to both parents and the kids. This may, however, become a habit that can be very hard to stop. If you are worried this may happen, it may be better to reassure them and take them to bed. You can also return them to bed once they’ve fallen asleep.

If they don’t respond to reassurance, you can let them “camp out” on a mattress on the floor in your room. This may be a temporary solution, as long as the child is made to understand and accept that this is temporary with a specific time limit.

If, once in bed, your children cry and call for you:

Go to them, hold them in your arms and comfort them. Tell them once more that you understand their fear and that it can be scary to be alone. Reassure them of your close presence and that you will protect them.

It may be helpful to have a night-light in the room or in the hallway and to leave the bedroom door ajar.

If your child wakes up frightened:

- **Go and reassure the child immediately.** As you enter the room, don't turn on the lights or talk loudly.
- **Acknowledge your child's fear.** Ask them if they "have had a scary dream". If that's the case, allow your child to talk about the dream without interrupting.
- Do not deny their fear by saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of." Instead be open, understanding, and help the child talk about it. This may help sort out reality from fantasy.
- **Reassure the child** that you are nearby, that he or she is safe. You may want to stay with the child until he or she goes back to sleep.

Older Children (7-11)

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Older children may also show signs of being upset after a stressful event. At this age, the fears and anxieties expressed show that the child is aware of possible danger to themselves, their family and friends. Real or imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the events may also appear.

Here are some common reactions they may have:

- **Afraid of being injured or separated from parents**
- **Fear that similar events may occur**
- **Fear of noises or of the dark**
- **Rivalries and quarrels among brothers and sisters**
- **Headaches**
- **Sleeping problems such as nightmares**
- **Eating problems and stomach aches**
- **Anger and irritability**
- **Nervousness**
- **A return to earlier behaviors such as bed wetting, thumb sucking, and clinging**

How parents can help

Take your children's fears seriously. Do not force your children to be brave. Respect their feelings and try to understand them. **A child who is scared is really scared.** Do

not show anger or ridicule. Avoid saying something like: “It’s silly to be scared”. **Telling children that it’s OK to be scared is comforting to them.**

Listen to your children and ask them what they have to say about their fears, their feelings, their thoughts on what has happened. Check in with them regularly. This will help them to better understand the situation and deal with their emotions. They will be able to express fears that may be unfounded, giving you the opportunity to explore their fears and reassure them. If possible, include the whole family in the discussion.

Try to explain the events as well as you can. Children, like adults, are more frightened when they do not understand what is happening around them. Adults must do their best to keep the children informed about what has happened and what may happen. Acknowledge what’s frightening about it. If you don’t know the answers to their questions, it’s OK to say that there are some things about the situation that you don’t know or understand.

Reassurance. Children usually need reassurance about their personal safety. They need to know that people are doing all they can to make our country and our world safe.

Parents as role models. It is important to let kids know what you think and feel. It helps them feel less alone if they know that their feelings are similar to yours. It is important, however, not to overwhelm them. If you are too upset, it is better to share your reactions with another adult.

When To Seek Professional Help

Children are amazingly flexible and resilient, and parents are capable of helping their children overcome their fears and feelings of anxiety about stressful events. As we have seen, there is a wide range of **common reactions** following a stressful situation. Most of these reactions, with some support, can be dealt with at home or at school.

However, getting professional help is a good idea if a child continues to show significant changes in his or her behavior, for example:

- Unusual and inappropriate behavior at home or at school
- Increased learning problems and difficulty paying attention at school
- Frequent angry outbursts
- Not taking part in usual social activities or play with other children
- Frequent nightmares or other sleep problems
- Physical problems such as nausea, headaches
- Changes in appetite, weight gain or loss
- Feeling anxious or afraid
- Feeling sad or depressed
- Increased risk-taking behavior

- Recurring talk about death

One stressful event can make another more difficult to deal with. Children who have experienced the death of someone close, a divorce or a recent move may have more difficulty coping. This is true for adults as well.

Following a seriously stressful event, some adults and children have found it helpful to talk with a health professional such as a psychologist, a social worker, doctor, nurse or psychiatrist who can help them understand and deal with how they are feeling.

You Can Help Your Child Cope

Remember, you have strength, knowledge and experience that can help your family and your community cope with the stresses triggered by violent events. An important part of this job is taking care of yourself.

Acknowledgments

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Responding to the Stress of Terrorism and Armed Conflicts