Helping Children Cope With a Traumatic Event

Children's fear and anxiety may cause them to act younger than their age. They may begin behavior that is not typical for their age and may act out in ways that are dangerous or inappropriate. They may have frequent nightmares or other sleep disturbances, aggressive outbursts, punishment with a disastrous event may cause a child to feel personally threatened.

Give honest, simple, brief answers to your child's questions.

Listen to your child's feelings and accept them, even if they are different from yours.

Notice when your child has questions and wants to talk.

Talk about what happened.

Children are afraid that the trauma will happen again, and that they or their family will be injured or hurt. Children of all ages can experience difficulties with concentration. Many find that they are easily distracted and feel somewhat confused and disoriented.

Physical reactions

Bedtime problems

Physiological problems such as nausea, headaches, weight gain or loss, a continued preoccupation with the event as a primary focus in life, anxious behavior, and other anxious symptoms such as restlessness, irritability, aggression, and uncontrollable crying. Children are often confused about the facts and their feelings; talking can help clarify what they are feeling. They may ask questions over and over again about what happened. Parents and children may have nightmares about the event.

How Might Children React?

Anxiety may temporarily disrupt his or her normal, more mature behavior. Many children may appear different from their usual selves. For example, they may become more irritable or moody, withdrawn, or demonstrate unusual behavior. Some children may be fully aware of the traumatic event, while others may have a memory of it, but may not be clearly aware of it. Some children may believe that the event is happening again. They may not be able to think of anything else except the event.

Physical symptoms

Children have physical symptoms as a response to their fear and anxiety. These physical symptoms can be immediate or slowly developing due to stress and trauma.

Physical symptoms include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping

Behavioral symptoms

Behavioral symptoms may also be present due to children’s fear and anxiety. These symptoms may be immediate or slowly developing due to stress and trauma.

Behavioral symptoms include:

- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleep habits
- Changes in social behavior
- Changes in play behavior
- Changes in school performance

Mood symptoms

Mood symptoms may also be present due to children’s fear and anxiety. These symptoms may be immediate or slowly developing due to stress and trauma.

Mood symptoms include:

- Increased or decreased activity
- Changes in mood
- Changes in self-esteem
- Changes in behavior
- Changes in social skills

How Do I Help My Child?

If you or someone in your household uses a wheelchair, make more than one exit from your home wheelchair-accessible in case the primary exit is blocked in a disaster. If you or someone in your household uses a wheelchair, make more than one exit from your home wheelchair-accessible in case the primary exit is blocked in a disaster.

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