

## Helping Your Family Cope: Responding to Traumatic Events

When another mass shooting takes place, as a parent it is can be challenging to manage your own reaction while figuring out how what to say to your child. The National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network suggests that parents should start the conversation about what has happened, as not saying anything makes events seem more threatening. ([Click here](#) for their brief guide.)

Find out what your child already knows, and listen carefully for misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears and concerns. Take the time to provide correction information and encourage your child to ask questions. Answer those questions directly, no matter how difficult the question. You might be asked whether something similar could happen here. While it's important to answer honestly, your child may be looking for reassurance that your family will be safe. Find the right moment to talk about your own family's plan for keeping safe in a crisis.

Limit media exposure, especially for very young children. Be aware that the constant barrage of news updates repeating the same information, especially when audio or video recordings of the attack are played, can be very disturbing to a child. Limit your own exposure to the coverage so that you can focus on what your child needs.

Don't be surprised if your child's behavior changes, even if you have a teen. Even if your teen isn't talking, they may be thinking about what has happened. Keep the conversation going, be patient with your family (and yourself) and provide an extra dose of comfort and understanding. Reach out for help if you are worried that a family member doesn't "bounce back" in a reasonable time. Sometimes traumatic events act as a kind of emotional trigger.

Be a positive role model, express empathy for victims, and use this as an opportunity to share ideas for coming with difficult situations like this tragedy. Find the good in the story -- how first responders acted, how people helped and protected each other or the people who lined up to give blood. While there may not be a concrete way to help in the way we sent relief supplies and contributions to Porto Rico and Mexico after the hurricane and earthquake -- thoughts and prayers for the victims is an affirmation of care and concern that is important to express and share with your family.

For more detailed information, check out the links in the "Further Reading" sidebar.

### Further Reading

The Child Mind Institute has prepared resources to help parents and other adults in talking to children and teens about traumatic events. [Click here](#) for a link to the guide.

(link: <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-traumatic-event/tips-helping-children-trauma/> )

The [National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network](#) created a guide for parents: Click here for a link to "Talking to Children About the Shooting."

**Community Tragedy: Stress, Trauma and Media Overload** by Dr. Donna Gaffney of the Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth discusses the dangers of the unrelenting exposure to media coverage of tragic, violent or traumatic events. The key takeaway, avoid media overload: turn off the radio and television and take a break from social media. Be pro-active and have a plan to counteract the unrelenting news cycle.

[TLC4Teens](#) has resources for supporting teens and their families facing challenges both in everyday life and when facing traumatic events like the Las Vegas Shooting.

### **When Disaster Strikes: Talking to Children about Traumatic Events**

<http://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/healthy-communication/when-disaster-strikes-talking-to-children-about-traumatic-events/>

## **Taking Action**

An excerpt from: [How to Support Your Child's Resilience in a Time of Crisis](#)

( <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-to-Support-Your-Childs-Resilience-in-a-Time-of-Crisis.aspx> )

### **Restoring Balance**

If your family has been directly involved in an [act of terror](#), war, or a natural disaster, you will have spent weeks or months—hopefully with adequate support—in recovering your lives. If your family has been on the periphery of these crises but have been witnesses via the media, you will still need time to restore some emotional balance. During these periods, a few small things can help children.

### **Get back to old routines**

As soon as reasonably possible, try to follow old routines because they provide comfort and a familiar structure to a child's daily life. For example, get her back in school and do not cancel [celebrations](#) like birthday parties or after-school activities that she enjoys. Follow as normal a schedule as possible. Even if you are at a shelter, you can still maintain some family rituals like singing the same songs or reciting the same stories before [bedtime](#). Try to maintain household rules and discipline routines, but be aware that changes in behavior may be a result of fears or insecurities that can be alleviated through repeated reassurances and extra attention. It's OK to let your children be more dependent on you in the aftermath of a traumatic event. Children may be more distracted and have trouble concentrating on schoolwork. Be patient and give them gentle reminders and extra help if needed. Children may be more anxious when separating from parents for bedtime or when parents need to leave for work or an appointment. Give yourself extra time to cuddle and talk to your children before separating from them.

Remember that your children's world revolves around you and your home. Any disruption to your normal family activities will be felt by your children. Things that may seem trivial to you, like watching television, playing on the computer, or having friends over, are important to your children and will be seen as tremendous losses if they are disrupted. Be patient and help children think of alternative activities if their normal toys aren't available or if their regular activities are cancelled. Provide plenty of opportunities for play.

### **Review your family's disaster preparedness plan**

Another way to encourage a child's sense of control is to review your own family's [preparedness plan](#) together. Coming up with a family plan in case a disaster directly affects you next time (or strikes again) can help increase your family's sense of security.

### **Find ways to help others**

Finally, provide your children with [opportunities to help others](#). Children cope better and recover sooner when they help others because it creates a sense of control and helps children feel better about themselves. By helping those affected by the tragedy or honoring those who died, children can regain a sense of control over a tragedy that often makes them feel helpless.

We all try to teach our children resilience so that they can bounce back from life's challenges. That is not always easy and the American Psychological Association's [The Road to Resilience](#) is a helpful tool for cultivating resilience in ourselves and our families. (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>)

[Building Resilience in Children](#) has 20 suggestions for strategies to help your child develop the life skills to be able to bounce back from tough times.  
( <http://www.heyigmund.com/building-resilience-children/> )

A helpful graphic from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help prepare for disasters:

[https://www.aap.org/en-us/PublishingImages/disasters\\_disaster\\_preparedness\\_month.png](https://www.aap.org/en-us/PublishingImages/disasters_disaster_preparedness_month.png)

[3 Mindfulness Practices for Grief, Loss & Building Resilience](#) provides simple straight forward ways to start your mindfulness practice using your breathing and stepping out into nature, whether it is just out your back door, in the local park or waiting to pick your child up from school.  
( <https://www.treehugger.com/health/3-mindfulness-practices-grief-and-loss.html> )

We've gathered additional reading on mindful practices [here](#), including the [spenj.org](http://spenj.org) article "Can Meditation Positively Impact Your Teenager? It Absolutely Can" as well links to tips on learning how to meditate and integrate mindfulness into your family's life.

# Are You Prepared For **DISASTERS?**



## Family Readiness Kit

American Academy of Pediatrics



## Talking to Children about the Shooting

The recent shooting has evoked many emotions—sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger. Children who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the shooting may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance.

- **Start the conversation.** Talk about the shooting with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child's mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about this. Chances are your child has heard about it, too.
- **What does your child already know?** Start by asking what your child/teen already has heard about the events from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the shooting are known.
- **Gently correct inaccurate information.** If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about the incident. For example, she may ask if it is possible that it could happen at your workplace; she is probably really asking whether it is "likely." The concern about re-occurrence will be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. While it is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk, she is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has for keeping safe in the event of *any* crisis situation. Do give any information you have on the help and support the victims and their families are receiving. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.
- **Limit media exposure.** Limit your child's exposure to media images and sounds of the shooting, and *do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio shooting-related messages.* Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often are aware of what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of this shooting.
- **Common reactions.** Children/Teens may have reactions to this tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating.





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Dear Friend,

In recent years traumatic events have shocked communities around the world. Acts of violence and natural disasters are hard even for adults to comprehend and, sadly, we can't shield our children from pain and fear when they're exposed to tragedy. But we can help them process what they're experiencing in the healthiest way possible.

The Child Mind Institute has prepared resources to aid parents, educators, and other adults in talking to children and adolescents about traumatic events and identifying those who might benefit from more focused professional attention. All children who have recently experienced a traumatic event (such as divorce, death or illness) are more susceptible to having a negative reaction to being exposed to the news and media coverage.

I've attached an article, "Helping Children Cope With Frightening News," that includes basic tips on talking about troubling events, and our in-depth guide *Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event* with age-by-age breakdowns on what to expect and how to encourage healthy responses. The guide is currently also available in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Russian and Spanish.

We hope these resources will be of assistance in a trying time, and that you will share them with anyone you think might benefit. And remember to take care of yourself; your children depend on you most of all.

With my warmest regards,

Harold S. Koplewicz, MD  
President, Child Mind Institute

**Helping Children Cope With Frightening News**  
What parents can do to aid kids in processing grief and fear in a healthy way  
By [Harold S. Koplewicz, MD](#)

President, Child Mind Institute

When tragedy strikes, as parents you find yourself doubly challenged: to process your own feelings of grief and distress, and to help your children do the same.

I wish I could tell you how to spare your children pain, when they've lost friends or family members, and fear, when disturbing events occur, especially when they're close to home. I can't do that, but what I can do is share what I've learned about how to help children process disturbing events in the healthiest way.

As a parent, you can't protect you children from grief, but you can help them express their feelings, comfort them, and help them feel safer. By allowing and encouraging them to express their feelings, you can help them build healthy coping skills that will serve them well in the future, and confidence that they can overcome adversity.

- Break the news. When something happens that will get wide coverage, my first and most important suggestion is that you don't delay telling your children about what's happened: It's much better for the child if you're the one who tells her. You don't want her to hear from some other child, a television news report, or the headlines on the front page of the New York Post. You want to be able to convey the facts, however painful, and set the emotional tone.

- Take your cues from your child. Invite her to tell you anything she may have heard about the tragedy, and how she feels. Give her ample opportunity to ask questions. You want to be prepared to answer (but not prompt) questions about upsetting details. Your goal is to avoid encouraging frightening fantasies.

- Model calm. It's okay to let your child know if you're sad, but if you talk to your child about a traumatic experience in a highly emotional way, then he will likely absorb your emotion and very little else. If, on the other hand, you remain calm, he is likely to grasp what's important: that tragic events can upset our lives, even deeply, but we can learn from bad experiences and work together to grow stronger.

- Be reassuring. Talking about death is always difficult, but a tragic accident or act of violence is especially tough because of how egocentric children are: they're

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likely to focus on whether something like this could happen to them. So it's important to reassure your child about how unusual this kind of event is, and the safety measures that have been taken to prevent this kind of thing from happening to them. You can also assure him that this kind of tragedy is investigated carefully, to identify causes and help prevent it from happening again. It's confidence-building for kids to know that we learn from negative experiences and help one another in difficult times.

- Help them express their feelings. In your conversation (and subsequent ones) you can suggest ways your child might remember those she's lost: draw pictures or tell stories about things you did together. If you're religious, going to church or synagogue could be valuable.

- Be developmentally appropriate. Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer your child's questions. Do your best to answer honestly and clearly. It's okay if you can't answer everything; being available to your child is what matters. Difficult conversations like this aren't over in one session; expect to return to the topic as many times as your child needs to come to terms with this experience.

- Be available. If your child is upset, just spending time with him may make him feel safer. Children find great comfort in routines, and doing ordinary things together as a family may be the most effective form of healing.
- Memorialize those who have been lost. Drawing pictures, planting a tree, sharing stories, or releasing balloons can all be good, positive ways to help provide closure to a child. It's important to assure your child that a person continues to live on in the hearts and minds of others. Doing something to help others in need can be very therapeutic: it can help children not only feel good about themselves but learn a very healthy way to respond to grief.

### Additional resources

#### [How to Help Kids Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)

A guide for parents, teachers, and community leaders that offers simple tips on what to expect, what to do, and what to look out for after a crisis.

#### [Helping Children Deal with Grief](#)

You can't protect your kids from the pain of loss, but you can help them recover in a healthy way, and build coping skills for the future.

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#### [How to Foster Resilience](#)

A community of caring adults—and peers, too—can be critical in helping a child recover from a traumatic experience.

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. Learn more at <http://www.childmind.org>.

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## Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

A recovery guide for parents, teachers  
and community leaders

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## Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

### Introduction:

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

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## 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 okay 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 and 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 television 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 her.

Do not lecture — just be understanding. Let kids know it is okay 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.”

Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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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 kids 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.

Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

## 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, bedwetting

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.

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#### Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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 okay, or to seem

generally cranky or clingy. After the shock wears off 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 decrease or your child starts to hear voices, sees things that are not there, becomes excessively worried, has temper tantrums, or hurts himself or others (e.g., head banging, punching or kicking).

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; 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.

## 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 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 caregivers so kids can

develop a strong, healthy attachment.

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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.

### 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.

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Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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

### Typical reactions of children

#### ages 2-5:

- 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, bedwetting and thumb-sucking

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#### Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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 2-5 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.

### What you can do:

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 television, 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.

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Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

## Typical reactions of children

### ages 6-11:

- 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 9-11)
- Withdrawal from social interactions
- Academic problems (like trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school)

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.

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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 for just a little while."

### To help kids ages 6-11 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, "What's been different for you since Grandma died? What feelings have

you been having? All of this is really hard to think about, but it's important for us to talk about it."

Use real words. Avoid confusing sayings 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 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."

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### Typical reactions of children

#### ages 12-18:

- Avoidance of feelings
- Constantly thinking about the disaster
- Distancing themselves from friends and family
- Anger or resentment

- Depression and extreme sadness
- Panic and anxiety, including worrying about the future
- Mood swings and irritability
- Changes in appetite and sleep habits
- Academic issues, such as trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school
- Participation in risky or illegal behavior, like drinking alcohol

## 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 believe they are invincible and 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.

### 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.

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Limit exposure to television, newspapers and radio. While teens can handle the news better than younger kids, those who are unable to detach themselves from television 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 12-18 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 and include your teen 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. Things don’t need to be perfect, but needing to do some homework and simple

classroom tasks is very helpful.

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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. Learn more at [childmind.org](http://childmind.org).

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 decrease 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.