

# TIPS FOR PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN DURING TRAUMATIC EVENTS

*Compiled with permission by the UNICEF South Asia Counseling Section from 'Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS'*

**A child's ability to process what happened is influenced by their age and other factors.**

## **1. Children process traumatic events at their own pace**

Be available to discuss the events on more than one occasion, as children's interest in and questions about what happened will change over time.

## **2. Don't judge one child's reactions to loss by another's.**

Children react in different ways. Some may find comfort in spending time with friends and relatives; others will prefer to process the events in solitude. Reassure your child that it is normal to react to trauma in a variety of ways, such as feelings of anger, guilt and sadness. Children may also be told that they can express their feelings in different ways, for instance, a person may feel sadness without necessarily crying.

## **3. Mood changes are to be expected in children following a significant loss or a disturbing event.**

Be sensitive and patient with the changes in your child's emotional world.

## **4. Encourage children to express and communicate their feelings.**

Memorial ceremonies and other rituals will be important for some children, while others may feel more comfortable in expressing their emotions through art or through connecting with their peers. Help your child to find constructive ways to express feelings such as anger and sadness. Encourage children to write their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a journal, or to draw pictures of their experiences. This will help provide them with a means to express their feelings.

## **5. Talk to children about the different moods or feelings people, including you, may experience after a tragedy.**

Express your feelings honestly, but do your best to avoid alarming or upsetting your child further.

**6. Find a quiet place and time to speak with your children and be available for any questions**

It is often best to start a conversation by finding out what children already know, and then listening to find out what questions they may have. You do not need to have all the answers and therefore it is okay to say “I don’t know” in response to your child questions.

**7. Provide children with honest and direct information about what has occurred**

To the extent that your child wishes to discuss what happened, engage in open conversations, using language they understand. When adults avoid discussion of traumatic events, this can convey that the topic is “taboo,” which may ultimately result in increasing a child’s fear and worry.

**8. Allow your children to retain as much of their daily routines as possible during stressful times.**

By maintaining familiar schedules, children will gradually reestablish feelings of normalcy, and their anxieties about what happened will be significantly reduced.

**9. Monitor exposure to media coverage, including television, radio and newspapers.**

Repeated viewing can be distressing, particularly for young children who may believe that the events are reoccurring each time they see them on television. Irrespective of age, over- exposure can be overwhelming, and may lead to feelings of distress and helplessness among children

**10. Try to remain calm**

This will not only show your children that you are still in control, but it will also teach them how to handle stressful situations in a thoughtful way.

**11. Reassure children that they are safe and are being taken care of**

Reassurances may need to be repeated frequently, even after the immediate event has passed. Most importantly spending extra time with your child can also help them to feel safe . Explain how the safety of the community is being helped by government and community agencies.

**Remember that children who had difficulty before the event, such as emotional problems or exposure to previous trauma, may be particularly vulnerable. If you are concerned about your child, or if emotional and/or behavioral problems persist for more than six weeks, consult with a mental health professional.**