

Coping with Tragedy

For School-aged Children

Children between the ages of 6 and 12 are curious and want to understand things. They know about right and wrong, and often see things as “good” or “bad”. They feel safest when things are routine and expected, and a tragedy can shake their sense of safety. They also are able to talk about how they are feeling and are aware of how others are feeling (e.g. sad, scared, angry). Children often have good imaginations and may overly connect to events, as if they happened or will happen to them or their families.

While they are able to talk about what happened and how they are feeling, it is important that this is supported by adults and led by what the child wants to know. Keeping information simple, talking about how they are feeling and that it is okay to feel that way, and letting them know that this is a hard thing for all of us to understand, can help normalize what they are going through.

What can parents expect to see in this age group?

- Anxiety and worry. They may worry about being separated from family (even about being in a different room or floor of the home).
- Trouble sleeping. They may fear the dark, or worry about someone breaking into the house, or harm happening to them or their parents, their friends, their pets. Sometimes you may see a return of bed wetting, or increase in self soothing behaviours such as thumb sucking.

- Increase in physical complaints, such as stomach aches or headaches.
- Worrying, either about bad things happening, or about seemingly small things in daily life. Kids may talk more about death and dying.
- Increase irritability and anger, including temper outbursts and crankiness.
- Using toys and telling stories that replay or relate to the tragic event.

What can parents do to help their kids cope?

- Monitor media: Try to limit media viewing and know that images are more difficult for our brains to cope with than words. For younger children, it is a good idea to keep them away from media if at all possible. If your children are watching or reading about news reports of the event, be in the room with them so that you know what they are seeing and can talk about it.
- Talk about what happened with your child. Start by asking them what they already know and correct any misinformation. Ask them what they want to know about (don't guess). Give them true information that fits their age and understanding. Expect your children to ask the same questions several times. Be patient; remember that by asking their questions, they're letting you know that they trust you and they need to feel reassured.

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- Remind your children that most people are good and are helpers and that there are lots of people to help protect them as they grow up. Talk about the police, paramedics and other emergency services that work to keep us safe and help us. Also, that parents, teachers and community leaders help keep us safe too.
- Let your children help in efforts to make things better. This might include helping in community or school activities, helping with fundraisers, sending a card or drawing to support others.
- Help your children get back to “business as usual.” Keeping them to a normal schedule is very comforting in times of stress or uncertainty. Do familiar things like singing a song you both like or telling a story. Particularly for bedtime, keep your usual routines (e.g., story, cuddle time).
- Encourage your children to express their feelings and respond in kind by sharing yours. Allow feelings of anger, but try to re-direct misplaced feelings of hate. Help your child name what they feel (e.g., “scared”, “happy”, “angry”, “sad”) and tell them it is ok to feel that way.
- Hold your child, reassure them, and let them stay close to you when they need to. If you are leaving, let them know when you will be back. Try to keep things as predictable as you can.
- If your child needs additional support, contact health and community resources.

Adapted from the MGH Clay Center (mghclaycenter.org), the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org), and the Centre for the Study of Traumatic Stress (cstsonline.org)
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