

Supporting Children in Times of Crisis

When traumatic events like shootings and natural disasters happen in our communities, our country, or the world, the news can affect our children's mental health in different ways. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents and caregivers support their children during times of crisis.

- **Take care of yourself first.** Children depend on the adults around them to be and to feel safe and secure. If you are feeling anxious or angry, children are likely to be more affected by how you act than by your words. Find someone you trust to help with your personal concerns.
- **Watch for signs of stress in your child.** Stress-related symptoms to be aware of include depressed or irritable moods; sleep problems; changes in appetite; social withdrawal; obsessive play, such as repetitively acting out the traumatic event, which interferes with normal activities; and hyperactivity that was not previously present.
- **Talk about the event with your child.** To not talk about it makes the event even more threatening in your child's mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible to even speak of.
 - **Start by asking what your child knows about the event.** As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and fears or concerns.
 - **Explain—as simply and directly as possible—the events that occurred.** The amount of information that will be helpful to a child depends on their age. For example, older children generally want and will benefit from more detailed information than younger children. Because every child is different, take cues from your own child as to how much information to share.
- **Limit media exposure, especially for younger children.** When older children watch or listen to the news, try to join them. You can discuss how the news makes you and your child feel.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Like adults, children are better able to cope with a crisis if they feel they understand it. Question-and-answer exchanges help to ensure ongoing support as your child begins to understand the crisis and the response to it. Keep in mind that they may not want to or be ready to talk. Let them know that you are available to talk when they're ready. After a crisis, younger children may not know or understand what has happened. Older children and teens, who are used to turning to their peers for advice, may not want to talk to parents and other caregivers at first.
- **Reassure children that steps are being taken to keep them safe.** Shootings and other disasters remind us that we are never completely safe from harm. However, children should know that they can be secure through safety measures in place in their schools, homes, and communities.
- **Consider sharing your feelings about the event or crisis with your child.** You have a chance to model how to cope and how to plan for the future. Before you share, be sure that you are able to express a positive or hopeful plan.
- **Help your child to identify specific actions they can take to help those affected by recent events.** Focus on what can be done now to help those affected by the event instead of what could have been done to prevent a traumatic event.
- **Get counseling.** If you have concerns about your child's behavior, contact your child's doctor, other primary care provider, or a qualified mental health care specialist for assistance.

For More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) patient education brochure *Responding to Children's Emotional Needs During Times of Crisis: Information for Parents*.

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