

Coping with Traumatic Events *Special Comments for Parents and Caregivers*

1. Don't be afraid to talk with your child about these events. Be open, honest, clear and accurate. Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' It is important, however, *how* you talk about this. Your children will hear some of your conversations with friends, family and your spouse. They may be hearing some of what is on the news because you have on the TV. It is important to make sure that you talk *with* your child. You should be the healthy filter of information for your child.

2. Find out what your child thinks and feels. An important first step in talking with your child is to find out what they have heard and how they feel about that. Young children often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. Often these distortions will magnify his or her sense of fear and make your child more likely to have persisting emotional or behavioural problems. Correct their misperceptions with simple, age-appropriate explanations.

3. Take your child's lead on when, what and how much to say. After you have some sense of what your child knows and how they feel, gauge your answers to their concerns. You do not need to be too detailed or comprehensive. In fact, you may find that the child just acts disinterested or seems to ignore what you are saying. If you let the child control when you discuss this – directed by their questions – you will find that you will have many, many short discussions and not one “big” talk. These little discussions make it easier for the child to digest this huge emotional meal.

4. Don't feel that you have to have all the answers. Some aspects of this will forever remain beyond understanding. You can explain that you just don't know – and that sometimes we will never know why some things happen. Help teach them that hate can lead to senseless cruelty. If your child sees that you struggle to make sense of this, their own struggle to do so becomes easier. And when they see you continue to be a solid and caring parent – even when you don't have the answers - they actually feel safer. The unknown becomes a less frightening thing.

5. Reassure your child. Many children – and many adults - are frightened. Reassure your child. Your home and community are safe. Steps are being taken to make things safer. Remind them that only a few hateful people did this.

6. Limit your child's exposure to media coverage. Watching the images of this over and over only won't help your child. In fact, it may make this worse for them. Young children are very vulnerable to this. Children six and under may actually think that there have been hundreds of buildings collapsing. If they do watch the news, watch with them and then discuss it. Ultimately, the goal is to decrease the traumatic power of these images and that is very difficult when the images permeate the media.

7. Resume normal patterns of activity at home as soon as possible. It is helpful to keep routines. If these events disrupt the family structure, events it can be even more disturbing for children. The sooner there is a familiar structure and predictability to your child's life, the sooner she or he will feel safe. When traumatic events disrupt a child's life, the harder it is to recover.

8. Anticipate some “regressive” behaviours following traumatic events. When children feel overwhelmed, confused, sad or fearful, they will often “regress.” And so do adults. You may see a variety of symptoms in your child: these include anxiety (or fearfulness), sadness, difficulty concentrating, sleep problems, increased impulsivity or aggression. These symptoms are usually short-term (days or weeks) and tend to resolve with reassurance, patience and nurturing. When children feel safe, they will be most likely start to “act their age.”

9. Some children will be more vulnerable than others. Not all children will react to these events in the same way. Some children may seem disinterested and no changes in their behaviours will be noticed. Other children may have profound symptoms that seem out of proportion to their real connection to these events. We can not predict how a given child will react but we do know that children with pre-existing mental health or behavioural problems are more likely to show symptoms. We also know that the closer a child is to the actual traumatic event (i.e., if a loved one was injured or killed) the more severe and persisting the symptoms will be.


10. Your reactions will influence your child's reactions. Your child will sense emotionally intensity around them and will mirror your emotional responses and interpretations. Younger child will try to please you – sometimes by avoiding emotional if they sense that it may upset you. Try to gauge your own sense of discomfort and directly address this with the child. It is reassuring to children that they are not alone in some of their emotional upset. Make sure they hear, many times, that even though it may be upsetting it is still important to share feelings and thoughts with each other.

11. Don't let anger be misdirected. A major mistake following these events would be to let hate win. Don't let your frustration, anger and rage be misdirected.

12. Don't hesitate to get more advice and help. If you feel overwhelmed or if you see persisting problems with your child don't hesitate to reach out for help. In most communities there are professionals and organizations that can answer your questions and help you get the services that you need.

Information taken from article by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Dr. Perry an internationally-recognized authority on children in crisis. In addition, Dr. Perry serves as the Senior Fellow of the ChildTrauma Academy. Both a clinician and a researcher, Dr. Perry has been consulted on many high-profile incidents involving traumatized children including the Branch Davidian siege in Waco and the Oklahoma bombing.

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