

# TOP PARENTING TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS AFTER A TRAGEDY

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## Helping children to feel safe and secure

Even though this is a difficult time, try to stay calm when talking to your children and respond to their needs as much as you can. Research shows that positive parenting helps buffer some of the effects of traumatic events. When children see that their parents are coping, it helps them feel safe.

- Make it clear that the danger is now over.
- Be supportive and remind them that the adults in their lives love them and that they are safe.
- Giving physical affection (e.g. supportive hugs, holding hands) can be an important source of comfort.
- Try to limit exposure to news reports.

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## Getting back to your usual routines

- Returning to your everyday family routines (mealtimes, bedtimes) will help give children a sense of security and normality.
- Encourage play and other activities children would normally enjoy, as these are important in helping children to work through stressful experiences. They also give children something positive to focus on.

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## Being patient and understanding

How a child understands and responds to a tragic event may depend on their age and developmental stage. Children can experience a range of different emotions and behaviors after a frightening and distressing event. Some of the changes you may see in your child include:

- acting younger
- clinging to parents
- having trouble sleeping
- experiencing flashbacks
- suddenly becoming upset for no obvious reason
- being more avoidant or withdrawn
- having trouble concentrating
- feeling sad, irritable or angry
- keeping a constant 'lookout' for danger/having trouble feeling safe

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Depending on what happened, children might show deep feelings of grief and loss. This is normal and is not something that needs to be 'fixed'. Be patient and allow your child to be upset and grieve. Let them know there is no right or wrong way to do this. Everyone's experience is different.

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## Talking with your child

For you and your children, it may feel like your whole world has been turned upside down. But with your help, children can cope and adjust. Children need to be able to talk with parents about their concerns and have their questions answered.

- You can check in with your child about how they're feeling, however follow their lead and don't force them to talk. Drawing or playing can also help children become more aware of their feelings.
- When your child wants to talk about their feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling your child how they should feel. Accept their feelings and let them know it is OK to be feeling the way they do.
- When your child asks questions, be open and try to give them accurate information about what is happening. It's better to be direct and honest even if the answer is painful. If you do not know the answer, offer to find out.
- Getting the balance right can be tricky. It's important to be available for your child when they want to talk, but if worries and fears are becoming a topic of conversation too often, this can increase children's distress. If this happens, gently guide your child to talk about other things. You could also make a brief, regular time each day to talk about what's worrying them and try to contain these discussions to that time. Remember to also make time and pay attention to everyday moments when your child is calm and settled.

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## Taking care of yourself

Children look to their parents to figure out how they should react. Take care of yourself so you can model positive coping for your children.

- Deal with your own distress as best you can. Even small actions can help, like going for a walk, reading, or listening to music. Stress management skills such as deep breathing can also help reduce stress.
- After tragedies, it's natural to have conversations with other adults to allow you to express your own thoughts and emotions. Using your own support systems and reaching out for further help is a healthy way of coping. However, try to ensure children aren't around when you're having these kinds of discussions.
- Try to avoid doing things that will add to your stress.

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## Encouraging resilience

When your child is making an effort to express and manage their feelings, it helps to acknowledge their coping skills. You could say something like *Thanks for sharing your feelings with me. I know it can be difficult to do that.*

When your child is feeling calm and enjoying themselves, this is a good time to encourage them to have confidence in their own resilience and strength. You could say something like *It was great to see you spending time with your friends today — being around people we care about can help us feel better.*

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## Seeking help

- Support each other and accept help from friends, relatives, and the community. This type of support helps children feel that 'things are going to be OK' and that we don't have to do things alone.
- With time and the support of their parents and community, most children will recover naturally after the tragedy. For the small number who don't, there is effective psychological help. If difficulties are still ongoing after 3 months, we strongly recommend seeking further help.

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