

# Creating Supportive Environments

CENTER FOR  
RESILIENCE + WELL-BEING  
IN SCHOOLS



## When Scary Things Happen

When scary things happen or our lives are turned upside down, it can be challenging to feel grounded and know how to best support ourselves and our children. The way we structure our environments, no matter where we might be (whether home or displaced), can help create supportive emotional climates- ensuring that children feel emotionally safe and secure and create opportunities for connection with our children and other family members. Our focus is on creating a consistent emotional environment amidst major physical environment changes. These structures can also help families regain a sense of control, predictability, consistency, and connection even when so much is out of our control. This resource offers guidance about things you can do to help your family navigate challenges.

### ROUTINES



Routines create predictability, reliability and support a sense of security. Routines offer opportunities for connection, reduce challenging behaviors, and help children with transition. Regular routines are often disrupted in times of stress or crisis.



Think flexibly about any routine you can either restore or begin to help support your child and family.

Examples: Doing your best to maintain a similar structure to your day, for example keep wake-up and bedtime routines the same even in different locations (reading together, tucking in), eating together daily, continue outside activities (e.g. school, sports) to the extent possible.

### RHYTHM



Attention to the rhythm of the day and the rhythm of the child helps us consider a balance of activity, social connection, and rest throughout the day and supports emotion regulation, coping and well-being. To the extent possible, build in time for rest and activity, quiet time and social connection that follows your own natural rhythm and your family's. Sometimes we don't notice how many transitions we make throughout one day and across a week. Reducing the number of transitions or creating more space during transitions, can make a big difference for ourselves and our children's energy and regulation.



Think creatively about how you might restore some sense of natural rhythm to your family's days. Take a moment to check in about your energy level and mood throughout the day. Ask yourself would it help to rest? Get activated? Connect with someone. Be alone?

Examples: Keep similar bedtime and wake-up times, build in moments of quiet time or active time for yourself, spend a few moments of connection time with your child in the morning; engage in social activities, quiet time, watch a favorite t.v. show, spend time outdoors, time for exercise or movement inside or outside, create a little more space to smooth transitions

### RITUALS



Rituals are any behaviors that have significance and are repeated throughout our personal, family, and community or cultural lives. Rituals support our experience of emotions, as individuals and as communities and like routines, rituals create predictable environments that support a sense of security, connection and belonging and can support well-being.



Is there a ritual your family can create (or do if already established) to mark that you all are together and safe?

Examples: singing a particular song, a mealtime start saying, gratitude, prayer or blessing, saying the same thing to your child when they wake up each morning or tuck-in ritual when they go to sleep, a regular prayer or another daily spiritual practice your family connects with.

# Talking to Children

## When Scary Things Happen

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When scary or violent things happen in the world, whether thousands of miles away, in your state, your town, or your home, youth look to the adults that surround them to help them feel safe and understand what is happening. This can feel tricky and challenging, particularly when the adults are also responding to and making sense of the same experience. Safe and supportive adults are the best predictor of resilience in youth. This resource offers guidance to help you talk with children and youth after something scary or violent happens.

### CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF, FIRST

Before talking with a youth, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during the conversation. Just as youth have feelings about these experiences, so do adults. You might feel scared, worried, overwhelmed, angry, helpless, sad, and/or concerned. You might feel distracted, scattered, confused, or even numb. These feelings, in both adults and youth, are completely normal following a traumatic experience.



A helpful first step may be to simply acknowledge the feelings you are having.

The simple act of labeling emotions promotes a sense of calm. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. You can also take a few deep breaths, a short walk, talk to a friend, or do anything that helps you feel calm or more grounded. This will help prepare you to talk with youth in a way that communicates safety, protection, and openness to talking about their feelings and experience. Checking in with yourself first will also help you to be ready to address any questions youth might have. It's okay not to have all the answers.



Your warm, open presence is the most important thing.

### CLARIFY YOUR GOAL



As you approach the conversation, it can be helpful to start with a goal in mind. An overall goal is to create a safe space for youth to share their feelings, questions, reactions, and experience about the scary/sad thing and to feel your support. You might ask yourself, "How might I help my child feel safe? Is there some important information for them to know? Is there any misinformation to correct? What might my child already know or think about the situation?"



Keep coming back to messages of safety, support, and willingness to keep talking.

### PROVIDE INFORMATION



Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how adults and/or community systems may have stepped forward to help and create safety. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of the youth. Ask open-ended questions about what they may have already heard and correct any misinformation. Keep this part of the discussion brief, simple, and clear. Multiple short conversations can often be more powerful than a single long conversation.



Remember to share child-size information and keep checking in.

### REFLECT



Reflection involves simply repeating back the youth's words verbatim or summarizing what the youth said. Reflection lets youth know you are listening and tracking what they are sharing. When you reflect, it is important to use their own words as much as possible.



Reflection communicates that you are listening and what they are saying is important.





## ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS



Ask helpful questions to learn more about the young person's thoughts, feelings, perspective, and needs. The goal is to gain an understanding of the young person's experience and NOT one of "fact finding," or learning about specific details of a situation. The questions we ask should be open-ended and focused on their experience, emotion and perspective. ("What was that like for you?", "How are you feeling?", "What are you thinking/wondering about?", "Do you have any questions or worries?").



Helpful questions encourage open sharing and help you learn more about a youth's feelings and needs.

## GO SLOW, PAUSE, AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE



Young people need a little time to respond after adults ask them questions. This is valuable time for processing emotions and coordinating thinking, especially as it relates to complex emotional situations. Make sure your body language conveys patience, openness and care.



When you pause and allow time, you communicate "I have time for you," and "you are important".

## LABEL EMOTIONS



Just as it is helpful for us as adults to label emotions, it is also helpful for youth to label how they are feeling. Sometimes they need support to do this. You can help youth to label emotions by reflecting back any feeling words they say, naming feelings you notice, and taking a guess at what they are feeling. When you do this, check in with the young person to see if you got it right.



Labeling emotions supports emotion awareness and regulation.

## VALIDATE AND NORMALIZE



Step into their shoes and let the youth know that you understand what they are feeling and it makes sense to feel or think that way. You might say, "that makes sense," "I get it," "I understand," "other people feel that way too," and "you are not alone".



Validating and normalizing helps youth feel understood and trust their own perspectives and feelings.

## REDUCE MEDIA EXPOSURE



Be aware of how much you are checking the media when you are with youth and be aware of how much they are tracking the event in the media to monitor and reduce. Remember, that while it is part of our culture to be consistently connected to media, if youth see that you are checking your phone or the television constantly, they may be more likely to do the same, and increase their anxiety and nerves.



Information in small, developmentally appropriate chunks is best for youth and the adults who support them.



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# What Not to Say

## Take-Home Message

Many school professionals worry they may say the wrong thing to grieving students and make matters worse. Understanding what not to say will help you be more confident and effective when you reach out to students. The suggestions can help you support grieving children.

## How to Act

Here are some behaviors that will increase children's comfort, sense of safety, and ability to express themselves.

- *Be present and authentic.* Keep the focus on the student. Offer supportive statements that honestly reflect both your relationship with the deceased and your sense of the student's response.
- *Listen more, talk less.* Keep your own comments brief. Ask open-ended questions to help students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
- *Avoid trying to "cheer up" students or their families.* Grief is painful. Attempts to cheer people up or bring focus to the good things in their lives are likely to communicate that you don't want to hear students or their families talk about their pain.
- *Accept expressions of emotion.* Expressions of sadness, anger, selfishness, or confusion are common in grieving children. These are an important part of the process. When children hear they should "toughen up" or "be strong for their families" they are less likely to fully express their feelings of grief.
- *Show empathy.* Reflect back what you hear students say and the actions you observe. Use compassion. Avoid judgment.
- *Step in to stop harmful actions when safety is a concern.*



It's important to let children express their feelings of grief. Sometimes these can be quite dramatic—shouting, crying, kicking the floor. It's also appropriate to stop behaviors that may be harmful to the children, to others, or to property.

## What Not to Say

Many common and well-intentioned statements are not helpful to grieving children and their families. Here are some comments to avoid, and suggestions for what to say instead.

Don't worry if you've used these statements in the past. Children are very forgiving as long as they feel valued and supported. They hear our concern more than our exact words.

Don't Say This	Say This Instead
"I know just what you're going through." You cannot know this. Everyone's experience of grief is unique.	"Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?"
"You must be incredibly angry." It is not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel. It is better to ask. People in grief often feel many different things at different times.	"Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?"
"This is hard. But it's important to remember the good things in life, too." This kind of statement is likely to quiet down true expressions of grief. When people are grieving, it's important they be allowed to experience and express whatever feelings, memories, or wishes they're having.	"What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?"
"At least he's no longer in pain." Efforts to "focus on the good things" are more likely to minimize the student or family's experience (see above). Any statement that begins with the words "at least" should probably be reconsidered.	"What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?"

(Continued)



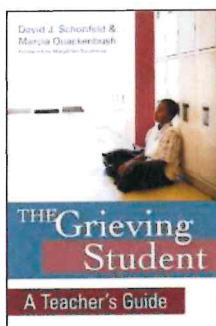
## What Not to Say

<p><i>"I lost both my parents when I was your age."</i> Avoid comparing your losses with those of students or their families. These types of statements may leave children feeling that their loss is not as profound or important.</p>	<p>"Tell me more about what this has been like for you."</p>
<p><i>"You'll need to be strong now for your family. It's important to get a grip on your feelings."</i> Grieving children are often told they shouldn't express their feelings. This holds children back from expressing their grief and learning to cope with these difficult feelings.</p>	<p>"How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?"</p>
<p><i>"My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling."</i> It is not useful to compare losses. Keep the focus on grieving children and their families.</p>	<p>"I know how I've felt when someone I loved died, but I don't really know how you're feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?"</p>

## Expect a Range of Responses

The most important thing you can do is simply be with students while they are grieving. Witness their distress. Listen to what they have to say. Tolerate silence when they're not ready to speak.

Suspend judgment about how students "should" cope with their situations and stay open to the wide range of responses children may have. Let them experience their grief in their own way. Let them know you will be there with them. While it's important to intervene when you think children may hurt themselves or others, most of the time children are able to express intense feelings without danger.

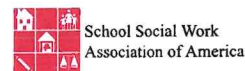


For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

### LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS



### FOUNDING MEMBERS








# CHILDHOOD TRAUMATIC GRIEF: YOUTH INFORMATION SHEET

## WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is the word used to describe the different natural feelings we have after someone dies. You can grieve after a family member, friend, or other important person dies. You can show a range of:

-  **EMOTIONS & REACTIONS:** Sometimes you can be sad and miss the person. Other times you feel up to doing your usual activities, like hanging out with friends.
-  **THOUGHTS:** You can remember positive things about the person, but also have thoughts that bother you, have trouble focusing, or have other worries.
-  **BEHAVIORS:** Your behavior may change. You may be less active, be irritable, not eat or sleep as much as before, or hang out less with friends, and want to be by yourself more.

*There is no set  
amount of time  
for grieving.*

There is no set amount of time for grieving. Most of you will find ways to cope with your feelings and the changes in your life. It is natural and OK if you still feel sad or miss the person even months or years later; especially if you are reminded of that person on certain special dates, events, activities or places you went together.

## WHO GETS CHILDHOOD TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

Most of you who experience the death of someone important adjust and recover over time. However, some of you may have more trouble adjusting and may develop Childhood Traumatic Grief. This can happen if the death was sudden, such as from a homicide, suicide, mass shooting, disaster, accident, or an unexpected medical reason. However, you can also have a traumatic reaction even if the death was from natural causes like old age, or a terminal illness such as cancer, especially if it was sudden, confusing, or scary in some way.

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## HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

If you have Traumatic Grief you may:

- Have upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, or memories about the scary way the person died that come into your head.
- Experience physical reaction such as headaches, stomachaches, or sensations that resemble how the person died.
- Become jumpy or have trouble concentrating.
- Avoid feelings or withdraw. Act as if you are not upset about the death or avoid reminders of the person, such as the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to their death.
- Remain in a bad mood or have unpleasant beliefs related to the traumatic death, such as being angry, feeling guilty, blaming yourself, distrusting others, or think the world is unsafe.
- Feel more irritable, have trouble sleeping or concentrating, or see your grades start dropping.
- Become extra careful and have more fears about your safety and others.
- Do self-destructive or risky things, like abuse alcohol or drugs, and feel like you want to hurt yourself.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO FEEL BETTER?

There are a lot of different things you can do to cope with grief related traumatic reactions, such as:

- Express your feelings in creative ways such as art, writing, or dancing.
- Do calming activities such as yoga or listen to music.
- Talk to friends and family to help you through.
- Check in with a mental health professional to see if you need more help.

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## WHAT IF I NEED MORE HELP?

Special therapy can help you pull things back together with friends, at school, and at home. You can learn what sets off your reactions as well as ways to take control of them.

### Suggested Citation:

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# Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event



A fundamental goal of parenting is to help children grow and thrive to the best of their potential. Parents anticipate protecting their children from danger whenever possible, but sometimes serious danger threatens, whether it is manmade, such as a school shooting or domestic violence, or natural, such as a flood or earthquake. And when a danger is life-threatening or poses a threat of serious injury, it becomes a potentially traumatic event for children.

By understanding how children experience traumatic events and how these children express their lingering distress over the experience, parents, physicians, communities, and schools can respond to their children and help them through this challenging time. The goal is to restore balance to these children's lives and the lives of their families.

## HOW CHILDREN MAY REACT

How children experience traumatic events and how they express their lingering distress depends, in large part, on the children's age and level of development.

**Preschool and young school-age children** exposed to a traumatic event may experience a feeling of helplessness, uncertainty about whether there is continued danger, a general fear that extends beyond the traumatic event and into other aspects of their lives, and difficulty describing in words what is bothering them or what they are experiencing emotionally.

This feeling of helplessness and anxiety is often expressed as a loss of previously acquired developmental skills. Children who experience traumatic events might not be able to fall asleep on their own or might not be able to separate from parents at school. Children who might have ventured out to play in the yard prior to a traumatic event now might not be willing to play in the absence of a family member. Often, children lose some speech and toileting skills, or their sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors, or fear of going to sleep. In many cases, children may engage in traumatic play—a repetitive and less imaginative form of play that may represent children's continued focus on the traumatic event or an attempt to change a negative outcome of a traumatic event.

**For school-age children**, a traumatic experience may elicit feelings of persistent concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family. These children may be preoccupied with their own actions during the event. Often they experience guilt or shame over what they did or did not do during a traumatic event. School-age children might engage in constant retelling of the traumatic event, or they may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness.



A traumatic experience may compromise the developmental tasks of school-age children as well. Children of this age may display sleep disturbances, which might include difficulty falling asleep, fear of sleeping alone, or frequent nightmares. Teachers often comment that these children are having greater difficulties concentrating and learning at school. Children of this age, following a traumatic event, may complain of headaches and stomach aches without obvious cause, and some children engage in unusually reckless or aggressive behavior.



**Adolescents** exposed to a traumatic event feel self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event. Feelings of fear, vulnerability, and concern over being labeled “abnormal” or different from their peers may cause adolescents to withdraw from family and friends. Adolescents often experience feelings of shame and guilt about the traumatic event and may express fantasies about revenge and retribution. A traumatic event for adolescents may foster a radical shift in the way these children think about the world. Some adolescents engage in self-destructive or accident-prone behaviors.

*Some adolescents engage in self-destructive or accident-prone behaviors.*

## HOW TO HELP

The involvement of family, physicians, school, and community is critical in supporting children through the emotional and physical challenges they face after exposure to a traumatic event.

**For young children**, parents can offer invaluable support, by providing comfort, rest, and an opportunity to play or draw. Parents can be available to provide reassurance that the traumatic event is over and that the children are safe. It is helpful for parents, family, and teachers to help children verbalize their feelings so that they don't feel alone with their emotions. Providing consistent caretaking by ensuring that children are picked up from school at the anticipated time and by informing children of parents' whereabouts can provide a sense of security for children who have recently experienced a traumatic event. Parents, family, caregivers, and teachers may need to tolerate regression in developmental tasks for a period of time following a traumatic event.

**Older children** will also need encouragement to express fears, sadness, and anger in the supportive environment of the family. These school-age children may need to be encouraged to discuss their worries with family members. It is important to acknowledge the normality of their feelings and to correct any distortions of the traumatic events that they express. Parents can be invaluable in supporting their children in reporting to teachers when their thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of their concentrating and learning.

**For adolescents** who have experienced a traumatic event, the family can encourage discussion of the event and feelings about it and expectations of what could have been done to prevent the event. Parents can discuss the expectable strain on relationships with family and peers, and offer support in these challenges. It may be important to help adolescents understand “acting out” behavior as an effort to voice anger about traumatic events. It may also be important to discuss thoughts of revenge following an act of violence, address realistic consequences of actions, and help formulate constructive alternatives that lessen the sense of helplessness the adolescents may be experiencing.

When children experience a traumatic event, the entire family is affected. Often, family members have different experiences around the event and different emotional responses to the traumatic event. Recognizing each others' experience of the event, and helping each other cope with possible feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, or even guilt in not being able to protect children from a traumatic experience, is an important component of a family's emotional recovery.