

A photograph of a woman with dark curly hair sitting on a couch, holding a white mug. She is looking down and to the left, appearing to be comforting someone. The background is slightly blurred, showing what looks like a living room setting.

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KNOW! TO HELP KIDS COPE WITH DISASTERS AND TRAGEDIES

When a tragedy occurs—whether close to home or far away—kids look to the adults in their lives for support. Because they have less experience processing difficult events, children are more vulnerable to emotional stress. They may struggle to understand what’s happening, feel a loss of control, or have trouble expressing their emotions.¹ That’s why it’s so important for caring adults to provide guidance and reassurance during these times.

Supporting children through tough moments isn’t always easy, especially when you’re also dealing with your own emotions. It’s natural to feel uncertain about what to say. This guide will help you navigate those difficult conversations and provide comfort when scary things happen.²

No one has to go through tough times alone—help is available.

By providing reassurance, honest communication, and a stable environment, you can help children feel safe, supported, and empowered to cope with life’s challenges.

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF FIRST.

Before you start the conversation, take a moment to acknowledge your own feelings. It’s difficult to offer reassurance if you’re feeling overwhelmed. Ask yourself, “How am I feeling?” and try to name your emotions—whether it’s anxiety, sadness, helplessness, or uncertainty. Recognizing your emotions helps your brain process them and regain a sense of control.

Next, ask, “What do I need right now?” Addressing your own needs—whether through deep breathing, physical activity, or talking to someone you trust—can help you feel more grounded. Remember, you’re not alone. Lean on friends, family, community organizations, or faith groups for support.^{2,3}

SET A GOAL.

Before starting the conversation, think about what you want to accomplish. Do you want to provide a safe space for your child to share their feelings? Correct any misinformation they may have heard? Simply offer reassurance? Keeping your goal in mind will help you stay focused and find the right words, even when the conversation is challenging.²

ASK FIRST, THEN EXPLAIN THE FACTS.

Instead of jumping straight into explanations, start by asking, “What questions do you have about [the situation]?” This will give you insight into their perspective and open the door for a two-way conversation.

When answering, be honest but age-appropriate. For younger children, keep explanations simple, avoiding unnecessary details. Focus on what happened, how it affects them, and what people are doing to help. Reassure them that there are adults working to keep everyone safe. Older kids may already have information from social media and might want a more detailed explanation. Provide facts, clarify any misunderstandings, and discuss how different systems are working to respond.^{4,5}

PROVIDE REASSURANCE.

Stay calm and reassuring during your conversation. Let your child know that it's okay to feel upset and talk about healthy ways to process emotions. If they ask a question you don't know the answer to, be honest and look it up together. Sometimes, there isn't a clear explanation for why bad things happen, and that's okay to acknowledge.

Children often worry that a similar tragedy will happen again, that someone close to them might get hurt, or that they will be separated from their family. You can help ease their fears by discussing your family's emergency plans and involving them in creating or updating those plans. Reassure them that you and others are looking out for their safety.^{3,5,6}

MAINTAIN ROUTINES WHERE YOU CAN.

Stability is comforting, especially in times of uncertainty. Try to keep daily routines consistent, whether that's having meals together, sticking to regular bedtimes, or continuing school and after-school activities. Familiar routines help kids feel secure and emotionally regulated.⁶

LIMIT MEDIA EXPOSURE.

When tragedies occur, media coverage can be overwhelming, often showing graphic images and distressing details. While it's important to stay informed, too much exposure can heighten fear and anxiety, especially for children. Instead of relying on the news, take time to disconnect and initiate a conversation with your child. If they do want to follow the news, consider watching together so you can help them process what they're seeing and answer their questions in real time.^{4,6}

GET INVOLVED.

Feeling helpless is common after a tragedy, but taking action can help both kids and adults regain a sense of control. Look for ways to contribute—whether through volunteering, fundraising, or even small acts of kindness. Helping others can bring meaning and hope in difficult times.⁴

SEEK SUPPORT IF NEEDED.

If your child is grieving a loss or showing signs of significant emotional distress, professional support may be necessary.

- Prevention Action Alliance's G.A.P. Network provides [grief support resources](#).
- [Findtreatment.gov](#) and [SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline](#) (1-800-985-5990) offer crisis counseling services.
- The [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) is available for immediate support via call or text.

SOURCES

1. [Before, During, and After An Emergency](#) | CDC
2. [Talking to Children When Scary Things Happen](#) | NCTSN
3. [Helping Children Cope with Disaster](#) | Red Cross
4. [Talking With Children About Disasters](#) | Healthy Children
5. [Talking to Kids About Current Events](#) | Kids Mental Health Foundation
6. [Large-Scale Natural Disasters: Helping Children Cope](#) | NASP

RESOURCES

[Grief Resource Packet](#)

[Findtreatment.gov](#)

[Disaster Distress Helpline](#)

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#)

[Crisis Text Line](#)



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