



Helping Children Cope with Critical Incidents and Traumatic Events

A critical incident or trauma can drastically alter anyone's life, especially children. Children are aware when bad things happen – what they see, hear and sense in their environment can affect them. Experiencing a traumatic event may challenge a child's basic assumptions about predictability, safety and control.

Children's reactions to critical incidents and traumatic events depend on many factors, such as their experiences leading up to and during the event; their temperament; and—especially—*how their parents react to the situation*. This handout is designed to give some tips for noticing and responding to these changes and helping your children cope with a critical incident or traumatic event.

Typical Reactions of Children

In general, how children react to distressing events varies with age. Children may display strong emotions and/or unusual behavior. This is very common. Children often behave badly when they are worried or scared.

Remember, "acting out" is often a way of asking for help. Here are some typical reactions of children:

- **Preschool:** Behavioral problems such as aggression, changes in eating/sleeping habits, nervous mannerisms, separation anxiety, regression in areas such as toilet training or language, play acting of the traumatic events, and periods of sadness.
- **School age:** Behavioral problems that commonly occur at pre-school age, distrust, stomach aches, lack of impulse control, rebellious behavior, angry outbursts, social problems, school phobia and depression.
- **Adolescent:** Depression and sadness, anxiety, self-deprecation, apathy, disenchantment, acting out, concentration difficulties, withdrawal, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, diminished interest in activities and foreshortened future.

Helping Your Children Cope

As disruptive and distressing as a traumatic event may be, *most children will recover in a supportive and safe environment*. So, what can you do to help your children cope?

- **Talk to your child.** Let children know it is okay to be upset, sad or angry. Help your children express themselves and answer their questions. Children usually want to know why bad things have happened. Parents should ask them what they want to know and answer their questions without giving them more information than necessary. Talking to children is a balancing act between honesty and protection.
- **Follow your child's lead.** Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need to be held. Listen to your child and watch their behavior to figure out what they need.
- **Reassure them** that you will be there and will take care of them when things are difficult.

- **Limit media coverage.** While you may be hungry for information about the situation, media coverage can increase fear and anxiety in children.
- **Structure your children's environment** so that it is as "normal" as possible. Have predictable routine with them (as much as possible). For example, bedtime includes a story. Enforce normal rules. Activities and routines are a source of familiarity, comfort and a key to healthy adaptation.
- **Give children choice and power** appropriate to their age. Children often lose control over their lives during a critical incident and parents can help them re-gain control by providing age-appropriate choices. For example, children can decide what to wear, what to eat or what recreational activities they want to do.
- **Create positive experiences to balance negative ones.** Putting good things back in children's lives reminds them (and you!) that the world can be a good place.
- **Accept any help offered.** Social support is one of the most important determinants of recovery after difficult events. Because a critical incident affects the whole family, family members are less able than they normally would be to help each other cope with problems. Help outside the family becomes especially important. Be willing to ask for and accept help from friends, colleagues and strangers.
- **Take care of your children by taking care of yourself.** How children react to and cope with a traumatic event is strongly influenced by their parents' reactions and behavior. If you have also experienced the traumatic event, you may also be distressed. You will be most helpful to your children if you remain calm and rational. When parents are too upset to talk to their children—when they have not come to grips with their own emotions over the events—someone else may need take on this role. If parents need to talk these issues over in order to establish some control over them, they should seek the counsel of a friend, family member, mental health professional or religious leader.

Summary

Everyone will have some days that are better than others. However, a series of bad days with no signs of normalcy is usually an indicator that something more serious is happening. Crying, withdrawal, aggressiveness in play, words, art, writing, etc., regression are normal in small amounts, but if it continues it might be wise to seek additional support. Do not hesitate to seek out The KonTerra Group for assistance.

There is no question that traumatic events can be disruptive and distressing for families. But it is important to remember that traumatic incidents can have positive effects as well. Families may develop a heightened awareness of risk and therefore live more safely. A deeper sense of family cohesion may emerge. Children may develop increased understanding and empathy for those in difficulty. By accessing one's own resilience and external resources and support, it is possible to adapt and even thrive.

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