

## Helping Children Regain Their Emotional Safety After A Tragedy

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A father murders his wife and children and then commits suicide. Someone comes into a school and starts shooting teachers and students. Four members of a family die in a tragic car accident. A close friend suddenly gets sick and dies. A young woman disappears and is feared dead. An argument between teens escalates into violence, leaving one dead and the others in jail. An earthquake devastates a community. A terrorist attack hits the news. A child is kidnapped and murdered.

When tragedy strikes, the results are traumatic both for those directly affected and for the community of people who know them or identify with them. Although we cannot control the fact that a tragedy has taken place, adults can do a great deal to help children regain their sense of emotional safety.

The following Kidpower recommendations are consistent with the advice from trauma experts from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

1. **Stay calm.** The negative impact on children will be greatly magnified if the adults around them sound desperate and as if things are out of control. Teachers, parents, and other caring adults need to be aware of what kids overhear as well as what they are told directly.

Adults can say true things that contain a positive message in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, like, "I am sad that this happened, and we are all going to work on ways to be safe everywhere." Or, "This is hard for everybody, and even though we are very sad and scared right now, I am going to do my best to make sure that we will still have a good life." Or, "We miss Grandpa being with us, but his body was too sick for him to keep living. Wherever he is, I know that Grandpa wants more than anything for you to be happy and have a good life."

If adults feel too overwhelmed, they can get support in settings away from their children. When children are around, adults can do their best to stay centered.

**2. Explain what happened in a calm, age-appropriate way.** Focus on reassurance and hope rather than going over the details again and again about what happened. Children are literal thinkers, so you have to be careful of words like "sick" or "problems" because then children might think that this might happen if their loved ones get sick or have problems.

For example, children who lose a classmate to a family tragedy can be told, "This is very sad, and we will do everything in our power to make sure that this will not happen in our family. \_\_\_\_\_'s dad was so badly hurt inside that he shot his family and himself. He did not know that he could get help with his problems. We are going to do what we can to help everyone be safe."

For children who have heard about a school shooting, you can say, "A person with a lot of problems got into the school and started shooting people. This is very scary and very sad. We are going to do our best to make sure that everyone at our school stays safe." Describe some of the things that are being done to ensure school safety.

**3. Give young people the chance to express their feelings without giving them the belief that they have to take care of your feelings.** Listen when they talk, even if they say the same things over and over. Give reassuring answers to worried questions. If this is a child's first experience with death, be prepared to explain what death is. Hospice has wonderful resources on how to talk with kids about this subject.

Remember that grieving is a process that can involve many feelings over a long time. Do something positive to honor the memory of the person who has died –write a letter to the person, draw a picture, plant a flower, or help someone else.

Remember that sometimes children can feel so overwhelmed by their feelings that they shut them off.

Unexpressed feelings can lead to problems later. Create openings for feelings by saying calmly, something you think your child might be feeling, such as, "I feel sad because of what happened. I miss seeing \_\_\_\_\_. Can we do something good in her memory?"

Sometimes adults mourn so intensely about a loss that they overwhelm children who want desperately for life to seem normal again. Instead, adults need to let children know that the person who has died or been hurt would want them to be happy, to laugh, to have fun, and to live a good life.

Sometimes adults want so badly for children to feel better that they do not give them permission to mourn. Pressure to pretend to feel a certain way can become especially intense around family celebrations or events. If a child doesn't want to go on business as usual, with a birthday party for example, then find other ways to allow the child to honor the event while supporting her or his feelings.

The best way to figure out how to do this is to ask the child and to offer choices, such as, "Grandpa would want you to do something for your birthday that seems right to you. You can have a birthday party with your own friends. We can take the day off to go visit his favorite park or meet some of his friends who can tell you stories about him. Or maybe you have some better ideas. What would *you* like to do?"

Accepting children's feelings means letting them know that it is okay to feel sad when they are sad, angry when they are angry, and happy when they are happy.

**4. Give young people positive ways to feel in control.** Do things with children that let them make positive choices, even with seemingly unrelated things as simple as deciding what to have for dinner. Therapists often recommend Kidpower after a tragedy because our program gives children the chance to

practice taking charge of their personal safety in ways that help them regain their sense of being able to be powerful.

5. **Give extra support and reassurance.** Hug children as much as they want. Spend time with them. Tell them over and over that you love them and that you are going to do everything you can to keep everybody important to them as safe and healthy as possible.

6. **Be aware of and prepared for behavioral changes.** Children and youth might regress into behavior they had when they were younger, such as bedwetting or being clingy. They might internalize their anxiety and become depressed and feel hopeless or externalize their anxiety and become aggressive and lose their tempers easily.

Be supportive and patient. If young people are aggressive, help them control their behavior without shaming them. Get professional help if children seem stuck in some destructive behavior and unable to get out of it with your support alone.

7. **Be a good role model for handling conflict.** The stress caused by a tragedy can increase the risks for adults of losing control of their tempers. Minor irritations can lead to major explosions.

Realize that young people might be hypersensitive to angry, upset behavior from their parents and other adult family members.

Remember that children and teens are learning more from what you do than from what you tell them.

Show how to stay calm and respectful even when other people are being insulting. Use positive communication skills to work out disagreements. Get help with problems. Walk away from trouble.

Make sure that any anger looks in control rather than out-of-control. If you have big problems with other people, get help so that you can learn to manage conflict positively.

8. **Model how to create positive meanings out of what happened.** None of us want to have to deal with tragedy, but a great deal of learning can happen during hard times. Showing young people how to make the best of a bad situation can create lessons for them that will help them for the rest of their lives.

My grandmother once described for me how her father died the month that she turned thirteen years old. Her family lived in a village in Poland in the early 1900s. "Even after all these years," Grandma wrote, "I remember every minute and all the pain of it."

Ten days after my great-grandfather died, there was a holiday for children to celebrate the coming of spring after the bitter winter in that part of the world. My grandmother and her sisters and brothers thought that there would be no holiday for them that year because they were mourning for their father. They were astonished to see my great-grandmother coming out in the morning of that day with a huge tray carrying an assortment of every fruit she could find.

Grandma wrote, "I do not remember my mother saying anything at all. But, to me, it sounded as if she were saying, 'Yes, you are entitled to have fun. Yes, you have a right to play and to merriment.' My heart and spirits lifted and I could swallow the lump in my throat. I raised my head and felt health and energy returning." Then she added, "Talk about child psychology – my mother had never heard of it!"