

Talking to a Child about a Traumatic Event

Even in the seemingly simple world of a child, life can be filled with complexities and uncertainties. Violence, crime, accidents and death are an unfortunate reality in today's world. Parents need to help their children sort through troubling emotions following a traumatic event and encourage them to grieve.

The Importance of Talking to a Child

Few things in life can prepare us for a tragedy or great misfortune. Children often are hit the hardest during those times, especially if they have never experienced trauma or loss. A range of confusing emotions can surface in a child, and he or she may find it hard to express these feelings or reach out to others for comfort and consolation. Parents and caregivers can create a safe environment for children to talk about these emotions.

Children need to feel comfortable confiding in people who are willing to listen to their concerns. They need to feel understood. They need to let the pain out instead of keeping it inside. They need to be reassured that, though it may take time to grieve and heal, things are going to be all right. While it is important to have this kind of support from relatives, friends and others who may have been affected by the same traumatic event, the most vital resource a child has in a time of crisis is his or her parents. Though they may not admit it, children who are suffering need their parents to be willing and available to listen and talk.

Understanding a Child's Emotions

Experts say that although children may not show much sorrow and pain outwardly, all children mourn when traumatic events occur. Children need to be allowed to express their emotions in their own way, as long as they do not compromise their safety. Many younger children act out their feelings through play and certain behaviors, such as anger, clinginess, irritability or regression (e.g., thumb sucking long after quitting the habit). Older children may vent their emotions by verbally lashing out in anger at the ones they love, listening to aggressive music and isolating themselves in their rooms. These age-appropriate behaviors are considered normal coping mechanisms if they do not last for an extended period of time.

Children also need to be reassured that the traumatic event is not their fault and that they are strong enough to carry on. Many children assume guilt and blame when misfortunes happen. Others build up incredible anger that such catastrophes could happen to them and may direct their anger at loved ones. Though it will be tough, parents need to be honest, consistent, accepting and loving in their approach to handling these issues with their children. Above all, parents should acknowledge that the emotions their children are feeling are absolutely real. Talking to your children about what they are feeling and offering your support will assure them of your understanding of the situation.

The Stages of Grieving

Children, like adults, cope with grief in different ways. Typically, most children go through the following stages of grieving:

1. Shock, denial and isolation. "This can't be happening to me." These feelings can cause physical symptoms such as bedwetting, exhaustion and sleep disturbances.
2. Anger. "Why me?" If someone died, for example, the child may feel abandoned or rejected by the deceased, demonstrate rage and blame others such as his or her parents or God.
3. Guilt. "It's my fault," or "If only I hadn't done..." Because children frequently disagree with their parents, they may carry guilt if a trauma affects one of their parents.
4. Bargaining. "If you just make it better, God, I promise to..."
5. Depression. "It's no use." The child may feel emotions such as deep sadness, helplessness, hopelessness and isolation.
6. Acceptance. "I acknowledge what has happened, and I can get through this." The child learns to carry on. The trauma recedes in importance in daily life.

Coping Tips

Use the following tips to help your child and yourself cope with a traumatic event:

- Find solace in people who understand. Connect with other families who also may be experiencing a tragedy or a loss. Get involved with a support group. Ask what worked to help their children cope with a trauma.
- If the traumatic event resulted in the loss of life, commemorate the memory of the deceased. Attend a memorial service with your child. Honor the deceased by planting a commemorative garden in your backyard or creating a special dedication drawing or painting with your child. Visit the site of the tragedy together, and leave flowers or another loving token or gesture of respect. Returning to the scene of the event may help bring emotions into the open and bring closure to the event.
- Consider talking to a clergy person about the spiritual significance of the traumatic event. Your child may be able to find a higher meaning in the suffering through religious counsel.
- Give your child enough time to mourn and heal. Do not try to rush him or her back into daily activities or ask your child to forget his or her pain too early.
- When the time is right, make your child feel safe, secure and comfortable by returning to regular family routines. Children thrive on routines and structure as long as they are not used to ignore or bury unresolved problems.

Do not be afraid to seek professional help to ease your child's mourning, especially if the sadness lingers.

Warning Signs

Some children have more difficulty than others coping with traumatic events. Experts say that most children return to a state of normalcy and acceptance within six months of the event. However, if you observe the following signs in your child over a prolonged period of time, seek professional help:

- Lack of interest in daily activities
- Denial, when the child pretends that the event has not happened
- Poor grades and declining performance in school
- Frequent bouts of anxiety
- Social withdrawal from friends and family
- Inability to sleep
- Change in eating habits
- Irritability and uneasiness
- Regression, when the child acts younger than his or her age
- Bedwetting after being potty trained
- Use of alcohol or drugs in older children

Resources

- SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center: www.samhsa.gov
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress: www.aaets.org

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