

Coping with disaster and trauma: children's reactions

Children may experience psychological reactions to a traumatic incident. They react to frightening events in many different ways and there is no typical or "normal" reaction. Younger children in particular may find it very hard to understand what has happened to them, their parents or siblings. Like adults, they will have strong feelings; unlike adults, they may not be able to tell you how they are feeling and instead will express their emotions through their behaviour. When a family member experiences a trauma, everyone in the family is affected. It will take time for the family to adjust as they try to understand the reactions of other family members, and may have to learn to relate to each other in new ways.

Common children's reactions

Some common reactions in children include:

- fearfulness, especially at night or when separated from parents
- clinging, dependent behaviour
- a return to "babyish" behaviour that they had grown out of
- nightmares and sleep disturbance
- bedwetting
- aches and pains
- general misbehaviour and "naughtiness"
- grizzling and whining
- tantrums and attention seeking behaviour
- poor school performance

These problems are all normal reactions to an abnormal event that has affected the whole family. It is important not to get angry and blame the child for this behaviour.

How to help

Like adults, most children's reactions diminish over time. Parents and other adults can help the recovery process in the following ways:

- Keep communicating: talk about what is happening, how family members feel and what they need from each other. This helps prevent children from feeling alone, isolated and misunderstood.
- Reassure them that they are safe and will be cared for.
- Listen and talk to them about the experience; honest, open discussion is best, as the unknown is often more frightening than the reality for children. Even very young children know that something is going on and, again, the reality is easier for them to deal with than the unknown.
- Some children will need extra encouragement or special attention, especially at bedtime.
- Allow expression of emotions - they are part of the healing process; support the child and allow them time to work through it.
- Do things as a family and make sure time is reserved for enjoyable and rewarding experiences together. Shared pleasure carries a family through many difficulties.
- Keep family roles clear: don't allow children to take too much responsibility for too long, even if they want to care for a distressed parent. Equally, do not become too overprotective of children after a trauma; try to understand if they cannot fulfil their role for a time (like going to school or helping around the house), but talk about how they will resume normal activities as soon as possible.
- As much as possible, treat the child the same as you normally would. The child then can understand that you don't see them as 'damaged' or different to what they were before the disclosure.

Like adults, most children will adapt and grow through a crisis with the love and support of their family and friends. However, if the child's reactions are particularly severe or prolonged, or if you have other concerns about the way that your child is reacting to a traumatic incident, do not hesitate to contact someone who is trained to assess the situation and advise you. If you have not already been informed of where to seek assistance, try contacting the Health Department; they have a number of child and family units that can provide specialised assistance. Alternatively, try the Department of Child Psychiatry at the Royal Children's Hospital, your local community health centre or your family doctor.

Adapted from Mark Creamer: 1989