

# *Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event*

## **Overview**

Here are some ways to help children cope with fears associated with violent traumatic events such as bombings and shootings -- whether the child has been directly involved or has learned of the event through the media.

- Understanding your child's fears
- The importance of security and routine
- Helping your child
- Common reactions
- If fears continue

Traumatic events can have profound effects not only on those who have been injured, but also on loved ones, survivors, and witnesses. Extensive media coverage of tragedies means that the circle of witnesses has expanded to include those who were not present at the event.

Large-scale tragedies such as bombing incidents and school shootings can be extremely disturbing to children, who thrive on predictability and security. The following information is intended to help you understand and ease your child's fears.

## **Understanding your child's fears**

Children who have been exposed to a traumatic event are afraid of many of the same things adults are afraid of: that the event will happen again; that they or their family will be hurt, or that they will be separated from family members. They may also have fears based on misconceptions of what has happened.

## **The importance of security and routine**

Among the most important things adults can provide for children, at any time, is an unbroken sense of security and routine. If your child has been exposed to a traumatic event, it's important to do as much as you can to keep disruptions to a minimum and to reassure him that he is loved, cared for, and protected. It can be helpful to:

- *Reassure your child that you are there to protect him*, and that your family is safe.
- *Provide extra physical reassurance.* Hugging, sitting close to read a book, and giving back-rubs can help restore a child's sense of safety.
- *Give your child a comforting toy or something of yours to keep* -- a scarf, a photograph, or a note from you. Your child may be afraid of separating from you, and keeping a reminder of you close by can help.
- *Be available as much as you can* for talking with and comforting your child. (If you can, you may want to save phone calls for after your child's bedtime.)
- *If your child's daily routine has been interrupted*, let him know that this is only temporary. (You will probably need to repeat this many times.)

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### Helping your child

Open, thoughtful communication with your child will help comfort and reassure her. The following guidelines can help:

- *Ask your child what she thinks has happened.* If she has any misconceptions, this is a chance for you to help her. If a child knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with her about her fears.
- *Help your child talk about the event by letting her know that it is normal to feel worried or upset.* Try to listen carefully and understand what she is really trying to say. Help younger children use words like "angry" and "sad" to express their feelings.
- *Try to be patient when your child asks the same question many times.* Children often use repetition of information as a source of comfort. Try to be consistent with answers and information.
- *If your child seems reluctant to talk, ask her to draw pictures of what happened,* and talk about the pictures with her.
- *Encourage a young child to act out her feelings with toys or puppets.* Don't be alarmed if she expresses angry or violent emotions. Instead, use the play-acting to begin a conversation about her worries and fears.
- *Talk with your child about your own feelings,* but try to find other adults to talk with about your anxieties and frustrations. Children pick up on their parents' emotions, and will tend to feel more frightened and helpless if that's how their parents appear.
- *Shield your child from graphic details and pictures in the media.* They will only make her more anxious.

### Common reactions

Here are some common reactions associated with traumatic events and ways to help your child deal with them:

- *Regression.* Many children may try to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer and more cared for. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. It's important to be patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- *Thinking the event is their fault.* Children younger than 7 or 8 tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault -- no matter how irrational this may sound to an adult. Be sure your child understands that he did not cause the event.
- *Sleep disorders.* Some children have difficulty falling asleep, others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If you can, give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- *Feeling helpless.* Powerlessness is painful for adults and children. Being active in a campaign to prevent an event like this one from happening again, writing thank-you letters to people who have helped, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.

**If fears continue**

Sometimes a child's fears last long after a traumatic event, interfering with his enjoyment of everyday life. If your child has persistent problems with any of the following, it's important to consult your doctor for a referral to expert help:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- bedwetting
- fear of darkness, imaginary monsters, or bad people
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- thumb sucking
- unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness
- unusual agitation or aggression
- excessive clinging