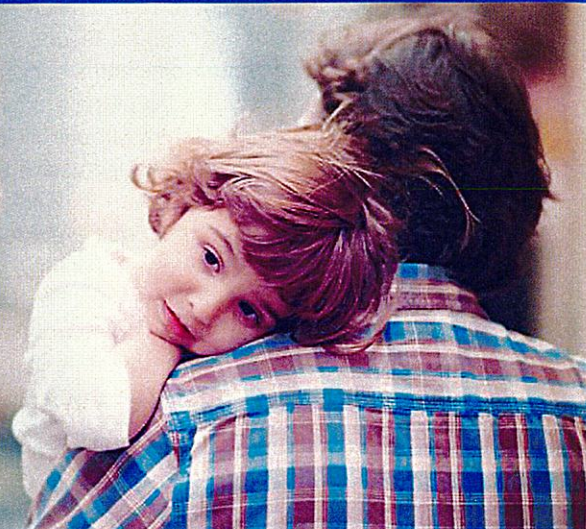


Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event



A fundamental goal of parenting is to help children grow and thrive to the best of their potential. Parents anticipate protecting their children from danger whenever possible, but sometimes serious danger threatens, whether it is manmade, such as a school shooting or domestic violence, or natural, such as a flood or earthquake. And when a danger is life-threatening or poses a threat of serious injury, it becomes a potentially traumatic event for children.

By understanding how children experience traumatic events and how these children express their lingering distress over the experience, parents, physicians, communities, and schools can respond to their children and help them through this challenging time. The goal is to restore balance to these children's lives and the lives of their families.

HOW CHILDREN MAY REACT

How children experience traumatic events and how they express their lingering distress depends, in large part, on the children's age and level of development.

Preschool and young school-age children exposed to a traumatic event may experience a feeling of helplessness, uncertainty about whether there is continued danger, a general fear that extends beyond the traumatic event and into other aspects of their lives, and difficulty describing in words what is bothering them or what they are experiencing emotionally.

This feeling of helplessness and anxiety is often expressed as a loss of previously acquired developmental skills. Children who experience traumatic events might not be able to fall asleep on their own or might not be able to separate from parents at school. Children who might have ventured out to play in the yard prior to a traumatic event now might not be willing to play in the absence of a family member. Often, children lose some speech and toileting skills, or their sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors, or fear of going to sleep. In many cases, children may engage in traumatic play—a repetitive and less imaginative form of play that may represent children's continued focus on the traumatic event or an attempt to change a negative outcome of a traumatic event.

For school-age children, a traumatic experience may elicit feelings of persistent concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family. These children may be preoccupied with their own actions during the event. Often they experience guilt or shame over what they did or did not do during a traumatic event. School-age children might engage in constant retelling of the traumatic event, or they may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness.

TEN TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE GRIEVING



If you know a child who has experienced the death of someone, you might be wondering, “How can I help?” Here are a few basic principles to keep in mind.

Speak openly and honestly about the death.

After a death, one of the first questions a parent will ask is this: “How and when do I tell my children?”

There is no magical ‘right time’ to share the news of someone’s death; the right time is the one you create. In general we recommend telling them as soon as possible, so that they hear it from someone they trust rather than from other kids or social media.

Find a safe, comfortable place and start with a short, simple explanation about the death, in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children. You might say something like this: “Honey, I have very sad news. Daddy died. His heart stopped working. He had a heart attack and the doctors weren’t able to fix his heart.” Even though it can be hard to think about saying these words, being honest and open is a great first step in helping children who are grieving. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation and keeps children from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened. If the person died from an illness like cancer or leukemia, it’s helpful to name it rather than saying, “He got really sick and died.” Being general in this situation can create anxiety for children the next time someone gets sick with a cold or flu.

Listen.

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, and make judgments.

What’s most helpful is to **listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating**. It can be

tempting to try to minimize in order to “protect” children. Sometimes the best

response is to repeat what you hear them say –

called “reflecting” – so that

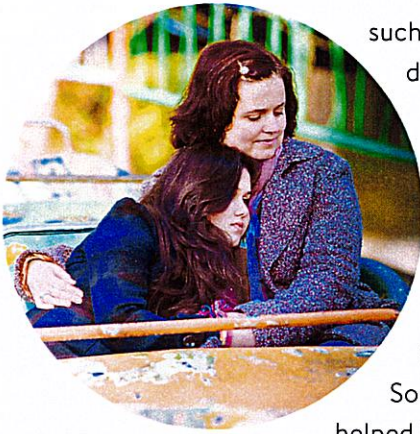
they know they have been heard. For

example, “You really miss your mom, especially when you wake up in the morning.” Listening to children, without jumping in to try to fix anything or make it better, is one of the best ways to help them feel heard and supported. Once children trust that you will listen and understand, they’ll be more likely to come to you when they’re hurting or needing advice.

Be open to different ways of grieving.

What grief looks like varies greatly. Some children may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves. Some children will not outwardly show reactions, which can be challenging for adults who are supporting them. There are many ways to process and express grief. People of all ages who are grieving tend to be hard on themselves, whether for crying, not crying, being strong, thinking about the person, or not thinking about the person. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each grief experience is unique. **You can help children (and yourself) by letting them know that all of their thoughts and feelings are okay.** Allowing them to grieve in their own way reinforces that there are many ways to respond, and that it’s okay to find what





such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for most children, others may require additional assistance.

Some children are helped by working with a therapist. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in grief and loss, working with children, and their treatment philosophy and methods.

Find sources of support for yourself.

If you are parenting or supporting a child who is grieving, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Find good sources of support. Research shows us that how well a child does after a death is linked to how well the adults in their lives are doing. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from your child. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.

These are just a few tips for how to care for a child who is grieving (and yourself). Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

To download this tip sheet in Spanish, visit: [Consejos Para Apoyar A Los Niños En Duelo.](#)



**The National Grief Center
for Children & Families**

Douggy Center Bookstore/Resources

Douggy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Douggy Center participants. To order online, visit douggy.org or douggybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Douggy Center

Founded in 1982, Douggy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Douggy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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Parent Guidelines for Helping Youth after the Recent Shooting

The recent shooting has been an extremely frightening experience, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. Your children and family will recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and community. But families and youth may have had different experiences during and after the shooting, including those who may experienced physical injury, involvement in police investigation, worry about the safety of family members and friends, and loss of loved ones. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to you and your family during and after this event. Some adults and children have been seriously injured and will require medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Over time, some youth and adults will return to normal routines, while others may struggle. Children and teens may react differently to the shooting depending on their age and prior experiences. Expect that youth may respond in different ways, and be supportive and understanding of different reactions, even when you are having your own reactions and difficulties.

Children's and teen's reactions to the shooting are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers respond to the event. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common after mass violence. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your children.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others
- Fears that another shooting may occur
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increase in activity level
 - Decrease in concentration and attention
 - Increase in irritability and anger
 - Sadness, grief, and/or withdrawal
 - Radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future
 - Increases or decreases in sleep and appetite
 - Engaging in harmful habits like drinking, using drugs, or doing things that are harmful to self or others
 - Lack of interest in usual activities, including how they spend time with friends
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school and work-related habits and behavior with peers and family
- Staying focused on the shooting (talking repeatedly about it)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the shooting (seeing friends who were also present during shooting, media images, smoke, police, memorials)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (loud noises, screaming)

- **Be patient.** Children may be more distracted and need added help with chores or homework once school is in session.
- **Address withdrawal/shame/guilt feelings.** Explain that these feelings are common and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done. Reassure them that they did not cause any of the deaths and that it was not a punishment for anything that anyone did “wrong.” You can say, “Many children, and even adults, feel like you do. They are angry and blame themselves, thinking they could have done more. You’re not at fault. There was nothing more you could have done.”
- **Manage reminders.** Help children identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. When children experience a reminder, they can say to themselves, “I am upset because I am reminded of the shooting because the potato chip bag popped. But now there is no shooting and I am safe.” Some reminders may be related to the loss of friends and/or family (photos of the person, music listened to together, locations of time spent together). Help your child cope with these loss reminders and provide them extra comfort during these times.
- **Monitor changes in relationships.** Explain to children that strains on relationships are expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during this time. Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Encourage tolerance for how your family and friends may be recovering or feeling differently. Accept responsibility for your own feelings, by saying “I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I was having a bad day.”
- **Address radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future.** Explain to children that changes in people’s attitudes are common and tend to be temporary after a tragedy like this. These feelings can include feeling scared, angry, and sometimes revengeful. Find other ways to make them feel more in control and talk about their feelings.
- **Get adults in your children’s life involved.** If there has been a serious injury, death in the family, death of a close friend, or if your child is having difficulties, let your child’s teacher or other caring adults know so that they can be of help.
- **Empower your child to get involved in their medical care.** For children or teens with injuries and long-term medical needs, encourage them to participate in medical discussions and decisions as much as possible. Have them ask their own questions and give opinions about different procedures. Teens are especially concerned about their physical appearance, fitting in, and their privacy. Talk with them about their concerns, problem-solve ways to address them, and respect their privacy.
- **Seek professional help.** If teens have continued difficulties for a couple of months after the attacks, parents should consult a trusted helper—a doctor or mental health professional.