

Helping Children Cope with Trauma

Provided by *ParentLife*



"Do not be afraid. I am with you" (Joshua 1:9).

God's assurance to Joshua can provide comfort and strength to parents who are trying to help their children deal with tragic events.

Traumatic events shatter a child's perception that his world is safe and secure.

Children react to such events with a mixture of emotions. However, most children will experience increased anxiety and emotional stress.

These feelings may be exhibited in physical behaviors such as

stomachaches, bad dreams, inability to sleep soundly, increased attachment to parents, (afraid to let them out of sight for fear something will happen to parents) and irritability.

In addition to physical behaviors, children may react to these events with fear, anger, or denial.

Fear—Children become afraid when things happen that they do not understand and when daily routines are interrupted. As they hear bits and pieces of conversations, see TV news programs, and watch the reactions of adults, they are forced to draw their own but often distorted conclusions.

Anger—Unlike adults, children do not know how to deal with emotions. They cannot understand what is going on, why they feel insecure, or why they are so uncomfortable with the emotions they see and feel in the adults around them. As a result they feel overwhelmed and respond the only way they know how— acting out in anger to siblings, friends, teachers, or parents. Anger creates energy, which must be released. Teach your child that anger is a healthy emotion that can be expressed in an acceptable manner.

Denial—Faced with more than they can handle, children often turn to their imaginations and block out unpleasant events. They may refuse or have no desire to talk or acknowledge the event. Play especially becomes a powerful tool for these children to express their feelings. Children may have difficulty determining what is real and what is fantasy. The terrorist events may seem to be more like a movie or TV show than actual, real happenings.

Ways Parents Can Help

Consider the following suggestions to help your child deal with his fears and anger.

Talk to your child. Asking your child questions will help you know what she is thinking. Talking will help you identify the specific fears with which he may be dealing. Allow your child to talk about what he has heard. Acknowledge and help your child express his feelings. Your child may be fearful that the same events will happen again. He may be afraid that his mom or

dad will die. He also may fear that he or someone he knows will be hurt. Sometimes listening is more important than having an answer.

Be open and honest in your conversations. Do not be afraid to use words like *died* or *death*. These concrete terms will aid children in their quest to distinguish reality from fantasy.

Encourage physical activity. For the most part, children deal with their feelings through some kind of acting out. Anger creates energy that must be released. Help your child express anger appropriately through running outdoors, kicking a soccer ball, playing with play dough, or riding a bike.

Draw or write. Provide paper, crayons, markers, clay, paper bags, and other art materials. Children can use these materials to create drawings, writings, or collages that express her feelings about the events. Encourage older children to begin a journal to record thoughts and feelings.

Teach spiritual truths. Tragic events provide opportunities for greater awareness of biblical truths. Children will want to know why such an event happened. Why did God let it happen? The simple but difficult answer is that “we do not know.” Assure your child that God loves us and knows what is best. We can trust God even when we do not understand why bad things happen. God does not want us to be afraid. You and your child may be comforted by sharing these Bible verses together:

Psalm 73:23: “I am always with you.”

1 Peter 5:7 “Turn your worries over to him. He cares about you.”

Psalm 56:3: “When I am afraid, I will trust in you.”

John 14:27: “I leave my peace with you. I give my peace to you. I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not be afraid.”

Hebrews 13:6: “The Lord helps me. I will not be afraid.”

Psalm 46:1: “God is our place of safety. He gives us strength. He is always there to help us in times of trouble.” (Psalm 46 would be a good passage to read together as a family.)

Pray for families. Pray for all those you know who are affected by the tragic events by name.

Remember that your child’s greatest need is reassurance of safety. Returning to school and other daily routines as much as possible will help him feel secure and assure him that life has not been totally disrupted. When parents and other caring adults give children time, affection, and hope through Jesus Christ, they help them find a way through their fears, anger, and confusion.

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