



Tips for Parents:

Helping preschool-age children following a trauma

REACTIONS	RESPONSES	EXAMPLES OF WHAT TO DO AND SAY
<p>Feelings of Helplessness: Young children know they cannot protect themselves, and during a trauma they feel even more helpless. They want to know their parents will keep them safe. They might express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide comfort, rest, food, water, and opportunities for play and drawing. • Provide ways to turn spontaneous drawing or playing from traumatic events to include something that would make them feel better or safer • Reassure your child that you and other adults will protect them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give your child more hugs, hand holding or time in your lap. • Make sure there is a special safe area for your child to play with proper supervision. • In play, a four-year old keeps having the blocks knocked down by hurricane winds. Ask, “Can you make it safe from the winds?;” Have the child erect a real or imaginary wall and say, “Winds won’t get us now.” A parent might also say, “That wall sure is strong,” and explain, “We’re doing a lot of things to keep us safe.”
<p>General Fearfulness: Young children may become more afraid of being alone, being in the bathroom, going to sleep or otherwise separated from parents. Children want to believe that their parents can protect them in all situations and that other adults, such as teachers or police officers, are there to help them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of your child. • Help children regain confidence that you aren’t leaving them and that you can protect them. • Remind them that there are people working to keep families safe, and that your family can get more help if need be. • If you leave, reassure your children you will be back. Tell them a realistic time in words they understand and be back on time. • Provide your child with ways to communicate their fears to you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear. • Say things such as, “We are safe from the hurricane now, and people are working hard to make sure we are okay.” • Say, “If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand. Then I’ll know you need to tell me something.”
<p>Confusion about the danger being over: Young children can overhear things from adults and older children, see things on TV or just imagine that the trauma is happening all over again. They believe the danger is closer to home, even if it happened further away.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give simple, repeated explanations as needed, even every day. Make sure they understand the words you are using. • Find out what other words or explanations they have heard and clarify inaccuracies. • If you are at some distance from the danger, it is important to tell your child that the danger is not near you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to explain to your child that the hurricane has passed and that you are away from the flooded area. • Draw, or show on a map, how far away you are from the trauma area, and that where you are is safe. “See? The hurricane was way over there, and we’re way over here in this safe place.”
<p>Not talking: Being silent or having difficulty saying what is bothering them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put common feelings of children such as anger, sadness, and worry about the safety of parents, friends and siblings into words. • Do not force them to talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw simple happy faces for different feelings on paper plates. Tell a brief story about each one, such as, “Remember when the water came into the house and had a worried face like this?” • Say something like: “Children can feel really sad when their home is damaged.” • Provide art or play materials to help them express themselves. Then use feeling words to check out how they felt. “This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the water?”

Tips for Parents: Helping Preschool-age Children Following a Trauma

REACTIONS	RESPONSES	EXAMPLES OF WHAT TO DO AND SAY
<p>Fears the trauma will return: Seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing something can remind them of the trauma.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the difference between the event and reminders of the event. • Keep children away from sensory stimuli that may remind them of the trauma as best you can. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Even though it’s raining, that doesn’t mean the hurricane is happening again. A rainstorm is smaller and can’t wreck things like a hurricane can.” • Keep your child from seeing television, radio and computer images of the trauma that can trigger fears of it happening again.
<p>Sleep problems: Fear of being alone at night, sleeping alone, waking up afraid, having bad dreams.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure your child that he/she is safe. Spend extra quiet time together at bedtime. • Let the child sleep with a dim light on, or sleep with you for a limited time. • Some might understand an explanation of the difference between dreams and real life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide calming activities before bedtime. Tell a favorite story with a comforting theme. • At bedtime say, “You can sleep with us tonight, but tomorrow you’ll sleep in your own bed.” • “Bad dreams come from our thoughts inside about being scared, not from real things happening.”
<p>Regressing to earlier behaviors: Thumb sucking, bed-wetting, baby-talk, needing to sit in your lap.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best you can, as these may continue a while after the trauma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your child starts bed-wetting, change her clothes and linens without comment. Don’t let anyone criticize or shame the child by saying things such as, “You’re such a baby.”
<p>Not understanding death: Preschool age children do not understand that death is not reversible. They have “magical thinking” and might believe their thoughts caused the death. The loss of a pet may be very hard on a child.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give an age-appropriate consistent explanation-- that does not give false hopes -- about the reality of death. • Don’t minimize their feelings over a loss of a pet or a special toy. • Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if he has any more questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow children to participate in cultural- and faith-based grieving rituals. • Help them find their own way to say goodbye by drawing a happy memory or lighting a candle or saying a prayer for the deceased. • Say, “No, (insert name of the person or pet) won’t be back, but we can think about him and talk about him and remember what a silly doggy he was.” • “The firefighter said no one could save Pepper and it wasn’t your fault. I know you miss him very much.”

Contents adapted from:

Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide
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Department of Developmental Disabilities

Department of Education

Department of Health

Department of Job and Family Services

Department of Medicaid

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services