

Children's Reaction to Trauma: Suggestions for Parents

Trauma can change the way children view their world. Assumptions about safety and security are now challenged. Children's reactions will depend upon the severity of the trauma, their personality, the way they cope with stress and the availability of support. It is common for children to regress both behaviorally and academically following a trauma. A good way to view the situation is that they are normal children in an abnormal circumstance.

Common Reactions to Trauma-It is not uncommon to feel any or all of the following:

-Shock/disbelief

-Fear

-Guilt

-Confusion

-Shame/loss

-Anger

These symptoms may range from mild to severe.

What can parents do to help?

The following list of suggestions may assist you in responding to your child's symptoms:

1. Children experiencing self-blame and guilt: Parents should help the child figure out events that he/she can control from those that are uncontrollable.
2. Children losing interest and experiencing a "blue mood": Arrange interesting activities, stick with their routine. i.e. sports, lessons, favorite activities.
3. Children who lose their appetite or experience weight problems: Don't force eating; prepare favorite foods; make mealtime a pleasant occasion.
4. Children who experience sleep difficulties: Keep regular bedtime hours; do relaxing and calming activities one hour before bedtime such as reading or listening to soft music; show additional affections and comfort; end the day with a positive experience.
5. Children experiencing excessive fears: Minimize anxiety-causing situations and uncertainty; be supportive and reassuring; planning may reduce uncertainty.
6. Children demonstrating aggressive behavior and anger: Use a kind but firm approach to let your child know that the behavior is unacceptable. Let your child know that their emotions are normal, but encourage your child to express his or her anger in appropriate ways. Do not react in anger; be consistent with your responses to inappropriate behavior. Let your child know that many emotions are normal responses to trauma such as sadness, guilt, loneliness, fear, pain, and isolation.
7. Limit and monitor media coverage of events to provide children with accurate information and prevent over exposure.

If your child's symptoms persist or you are concerned about your child's reactions, contact your school's psychologist, school social worker, school counselor or your community mental health center.

NOTE: This handout is adapted from the Trauma and Children (Authors: Lazarus, P.J.) and Depression in Children (Authors: Saklofske, D., Janzen, J., Hildebrand, D., and Kaufmann, L.) Handouts for Parents, published by the National Association of School Psychologists, Andrea Canter and Servio Carroll, editors., 1998. (301) 657-0270 www.nasdw.org