

Helping Children in the Midst of Crisis: Guidelines for Parents and Child Caregivers

Children are sometimes the invisible victims in a crisis situation. Their outward behavior of playing and laughing may disguise the inner pain and confusion they are experiencing. Because children are less able to understand the context and significance of a trauma, they may make faulty conclusions about what happened. Some may even think that they did something to *cause* the crisis event. Ideally, the best ones to help children through a crisis are the parents and child caregivers who already have a trusting relationship with the children. This means that peer crisis responders will usually take a support role as coaches to the primary caregivers, not giving direct crisis response to the children.

Children will benefit from:

- A basic explanation of what has happened (avoid exposing them to traumatic details)
- The opportunity to ask clarifying questions
- Simple education about the difficult emotional and physical reactions they may be having
- Reassurance that they are not to blame for what happened
- Reminders that they are safe now (or getting them to a safer environment)
- A return to a predictable structured schedule

Adults can help children in these ways:

- Listen intently when they mention fears or want to talk about them.
- Give them opportunity to talk about what happened and how they feel.
- Ask a child what he or she thinks happened, and why, to discover if any erroneous connections or conclusions have been made. Watch for signs that children are blaming themselves for what happened. Reassure them that they are not to blame for what happened.
- Give them opportunity to draw a picture of what happened and of how they feel.
- Educate them regarding the crisis situation. While they do not need to know all the details, they will benefit from a coherent explanation that fills in the gaps of important information. Give clear, simple, and truthful explanations of what happened.
- Use books, pictures, artwork, or videos to help them understand and to encourage positive problem solving and coping.
- Stay calm in their presence and limit their exposure to adult related fears, discussion about the crisis event, or graphic news reports on the radio or television.
- As adults, commit to a process of emotional recovery and stability for yourselves since how children cope will be greatly influenced by what they observe and sense from parents and other significant adults.

- Pray with them and reassure them with God’s promises.
- Try to avoid times of separation. Spend extra time together as a family. Temporary separation from parents during critical events may lead to separation anxiety later, which includes intense fears of being apart from parents and that something bad will happen to Mom and Dad. For children who have separation anxiety after a trauma, try to avoid prolonged separations initially. For unavoidable separations, have them stay with someone familiar to them and explain to them where you are going and when you will return. Contact them frequently during your absence.
- Be sure both parents are agreed on how to approach helping the children.
- Talk with parents of other children who experienced the same trauma. It will be good to try to have a similar story so that when the children talk with each other, they are not learning new details from other children.
- Realize that children may experience regressive behavior after a crisis including bedwetting, wanting to sleep with parents, or nightmares. Be patient and reassuring. Consult a physician if physical symptoms continue beyond a few weeks.
- Help children develop coping skills and invite them to participate in the process of coming up with ideas for reducing anxiety and increasing competence with managing fear (e.g., memorize scripture, listen to music, pray).

Avoid saying or doing these things:

- Anything that would belittle or minimize the child’s experience (e.g., laughing at them or telling them they are being silly).
- Anything that would criticize or shame the child.
- Ignoring them or their reactions and hoping this will just go away with time.
- Giving excessive attention to the fear.
- Comparing the child with brothers or sisters who may not be afraid.
- Instilling fears in the child by giving them too many details about the event or by telling them about other tragedies.
- If someone has died, using euphemisms such as “he’s asleep,” or “he has gone away,” or “Jesus needed him more than us,” may cause more harm than benefit. A child who equates death with sleep may develop significant anxiety about going to bed or falling asleep. Telling a child that Jesus needed the person more than we do may create resentment toward God.
- Allowing children to see your fears and worries which can enhance their anxiety.

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

Parent Tips for Helping Children in Disaster in Psychological First Aid – Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition by National Child Traumatic Stress Network & National Center for PTSD, 2006, 135-146.

Helping Traumatized Families, 2nd Ed. by C.R. Figley and L.J. Kiser, 2012. New York: Routledge.

Sojourners: The Family on the Move, A Book of Resources by Ruth J. Rowen & Samuel F. Rowen, 1990, Farmington, Michigan: Associates of Urbanus, 165-176.