



By Karen Stephens

# Helping Children Cope in the Wake of Tragedy or Disaster

Your children will never need your calm resolve more than during times of crisis. Among the most stressful events are uncontrollable natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, or floods. Equally as scary — and often for a much longer period of time — are man-made tragedies, such as random street violence, domestic violence, terrorism, and war. Every parent hopes to shelter children from harm's way, emotionally as well as physically. No one wants to think a disaster or tragedy will land on their own doorstep. But at some point, through no fault of your own, your children may face terribly difficult times. And this will present yet another parenting challenge for you.

Ironically, troubled times provide parents with teachable moments that, in the long run, can have positive outcomes for kids. With parents as role models and coaches, children can learn to cope constructively during crisis. For instance, children can learn to face and manage anxious feelings such as fear, insecurity and confusion. They can even learn to be compassionate and helpful to others in need, which in turn increases children's self-confidence.

Most importantly, responsive parents teach children that adults can be trusted and relied upon when life is at its scariest. That realization helps children cement a faith in the goodness that surrounds them. Whether surviving a crisis or typical daily life, a positive attitude helps.

Following are tips for communicating with children who have experienced or witnessed tragedy or disaster. They can help you provide children with the emotional support they'll need to understand and cope with events affecting them. If you have to apply this information with your children, take heart. After surviving a crisis together, families become closer and communities stronger. It's a hard way to do it, but making it through tough times together reaffirms love and loyalty.

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## Tips for Responding to Children During Tragedy or Disaster

- Whether you are in a disaster, or the family is hearing second-hand about a disaster, remain calm. If you need your child's quick cooperation, give them clear directions. Make them simple enough for children to understand according to their age and development.
- Give children a constructive example to believe in and follow. Children are extremely sensitive to your actions as well as your words. They will notice your body language, tone of voice, and even how gentle or rough your touch is.
- In word and deed, reassure children they're not forgotten in the mayhem. Let your actions convince them that their safety and security are your top priority.
- Limit children's exposure to graphic details of crisis. Children often personalize information. They believe crisis will affect their immediate family, even if it's actually happening miles away. Whenever possible, reassure children they are safe and far from the crisis. However, if you are directly involved with the crisis, be honest and specific about actions you will take to protect them. Lying to children erodes their trust.
- Explain disaster-related terms children hear. Describe what is happening in language children can understand. Terms to describe, and how you describe them, will vary depending on the nature of the tragedy and each child's age.
- Spend time together so questions can be asked. Children may understand some facts, but be confused by others. Listen carefully and clear up misconceptions to reduce anxiety. For instance, following 9/11, a child told a teacher terrorists lived in his neighborhood. When asked why he thought that, he said because he lived in White Hall Terrace. To the boy, “terrace” and “terrorist” sounded the same.
- Respond to children's questions calmly in language geared to your child's age and understanding. Giving too little information can confuse children. On the other hand, giving them too much information can overwhelm them.

- Be patient if children repeat the same questions two or more times. Children grasp abstract concepts slowly. Repeating questions is their way of trying to get a clear picture of events, including the sequence and reasons for them.
- If your family has children with a wide age span, speak to teens separately from younger children. Be open and honest with teens and give them plenty of room to express anger and disbelief. Caution the teens to avoid making angry or graphic responses in front of younger siblings.
- If children of any age are hesitant to ask questions, don't assume they aren't worried. From time to time, ask an open-ended question to encourage communication. Example: "I'm wondering if you're afraid a flood could happen in our town, too."
- Don't belittle children for expressing fear; accept it as a rational reaction to something out of their control. For instance, during times of high alerts for terrorist attacks, I've heard of school children wanting to sleep in their clothing in case they have to make a "quick escape" in the middle of the night. When fear like that is expressed, listen and reassure your child that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- Validate feelings children share about confusion or anger: "Yes, many people are upset over the earthquake. Lots of us are sad so many people were hurt."
- In the wake of tragedy, and during continued media coverage of it, maintain regular, predictable routines as much as possible. Nutrition, sleep, and play routines, along with old-fashioned TLC, like reading stories together on the couch, help children feel calm and safe.
- Limit children's exposure to news media covering the crisis. A child's fertile imagination also spins dramatic visuals for events described on the television and radio, in the newspaper, in the classroom or play yard, or right around your dinner table. Such images attack children's sense of security and stability. To complicate things, for young children, "seeing is believing." It's hard for them to separate fact from fantasy. With instant replays of news reporting video coverage, children form terrifying misperceptions. If not told otherwise, they can think multiple disasters are continuously happening for days on end!
- Plan enjoyable activities to distract children's attention from media coverage of disasters. Turn off the television and radio when young kids are present. To help children maintain perspective, we have to limit the re-hashing of crisis.
- Provide ways for children to safely express their feelings, through drawing or painting; poetry, essays, story, or letter writing; puppetry or dress up play.
- Children, preschool and older, benefit from concrete ways of helping victims. It builds compassion and gives children some sense of control. If appropriately involved in disaster or tragedy responses, children can discover what it means to be compassionate. Helping others, even in the smallest of ways, builds children's self-confidence. It's an antidote to the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness all of us encounter during disaster.
- Don't assume your efforts will only be needed for the short term. For years to come, kids will need your reassurance and guiding light. As children grow and mature, they'll revisit and review mind-searing incidents from new perspectives. Advancing development brings new questions. When asked, your children need your time to listen. And they need your honest, heartfelt responses.
- The anniversary of tragedies will sometimes be remembered and publicized. Left alone to spin in the media blitz, young children won't be able to discern which events and images are from the past and which are current. Children's fears can be allayed if you explain the difference.
- Separate your feelings from your child's. If you become overwhelmed by crisis, find others to whom you can safely express anxiety, such as family, friends, neighbors, or a counselor. By getting help for yourself, you'll be better able to support your children.

### Symptoms of Children Over-Stressed by Crisis

- During times of unrelenting stress, children may experience changes in behavior or attitude. If such signs don't reduce over time, or in fact increase, consider taking children for counseling to help them make sense of reality. Symptoms calling for skilled help include: changes in sleep patterns, appetite, or energy level; bedwetting; regression in toilet training; regression to thumb sucking; uncharacteristic separation problems from parents; excessive whining and irritability; long-term poor concentration; unusual, persistent aggression; and apathy, isolation, and depression.

### Books for Parents and Others Helping Children

- *What Happened to the World? Helping children cope in turbulent times* by Jim Greenman. Published by Bright Horizons Family Solutions, JPMorgan Chase, Mercy Corps, and The Dougy Center, 2001.
- *Bad Stuff in the News: A guide to handling the headlines* by Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman. New York, NY: Sea Star Books, 2002.

### A Reassuring Children's Book

- *The Place I Know: Poems of Comfort* selected by Georgia Heard. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2002.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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