

## **Helping children through crisis: 10 tips for parents and caregivers**

After decades of responding to emergencies around the world, we've seen that kids are often the most vulnerable in times of crisis. Whether they are personally affected or exposed to traumatic circumstances through media coverage, it is important to protect children's emotional wellbeing as much as their physical safety.

Here, Carol Dell'Oliver, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist who has consulted on our [Comfort for Kids program](#), offers her recommendations for how parents and caregivers can help children cope with tragic events.

### **1. Be aware of common reactions to trauma**

Each child is unique in how he or she responds to frightening events. Some children may become more quiet or withdrawn, while others may become irritable or act out to get more attention. Many kids will begin acting younger by sucking their thumb or clinging to parents. It's important to remember that these are all normal reactions to trauma and to respond in a calm and caring way.

### **2. Be prepared to deal with fears and worries**

Common childhood fears may intensify after a crisis. Kids are often more afraid of the dark and being alone. Sleep problems and physical symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches become more frequent, especially for younger children who cannot verbalize their feelings. You can help children soothe themselves by reading stories, playing gentle music, giving back rubs and serving comfort foods. They need to be reassured with both words and hugs.

### **3. Create a sense of safety**

Because children will feel vulnerable and overwhelmed, it's important to initially focus on being protective and offering them physical comforts — blankets, favorite foods, calming activities — to restore their sense of security. Spending extra time together as a family is a refuge to kids in times of uncertainty.

### **4. Limit exposure to news**

Don't rely on the news to give your child the information they're looking for. Sounds and images from news reports are often too vivid for children and make them internalize the trauma even more. It's important to clarify their confusion and give honest answers, but stick to the basic facts and follow up with the reassurance that their safety is the most important thing to you.

### **5. Take time to listen**

Make sure children have the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns. Asking open-ended questions ("What news did you hear? How do you feel? Do you have any questions?") allows them to identify their needs. Actively listen without correcting or minimizing their emotions and follow up with clear statements of reassurance ("We do all that we can to keep you safe.")

### **6. Encourage writing and drawing about the experience**

Some kids may not feel like talking, so provide ways for them to express themselves in other ways. Writing and drawing pictures can help kids deal with what's troubling them. Use these as an opportunity to remind them that it's okay to feel the way they do; you can help by continuing to listen and accepting where they are emotionally throughout the healing process.

### **7. Remember to play**

Play is every child's natural form of communicating and processing events. Kids can tell stories about what they've heard and how they feel, even if they don't fully comprehend it. It's also a healthy distraction from difficult circumstances and provides an outlet to relieve pent-up energy and stress.

### **8. Model healthy coping skills**

Your kids will look to you not only for reassurance, but how to deal with their own complicated emotions. Allow yourself enough private time to process what you're going through so you have the resources to be there for them. But don't feel like you need to hide signs of distress all the time — should you children see you get upset, you can be an example by telling them that you may be feeling sad right now, but you have ways to help yourself feel better soon.

### **9. Monitor behavior over time**

While it is normal for children's behavior to change in response to trauma, symptoms of stress can become problematic if they linger. Simply keep an eye on changes in their sleeping, eating, playing, studying and socializing; if there are no improvements over time, reach out to a professional for help.

### **10. Inspire a positive response**

Kids need to rediscover a sense of personal empowerment and resilience after an event very much out of their control. Help them direct their feelings constructively and consider what they can do to help others. Having them write a card or volunteering as a family not only gives them something positive to focus on, but sets the tone for giving back through anything life brings.