

Helping a Child Manage Fears After a Traumatic Event: Helping your child

Children of all ages may have strong reactions to traumatic events such as fires, plane crashes, or violent crimes. Because traumatic events are part of life, you can't protect children from ever hearing about them. But you can take steps to help them manage their feelings.

This is the second in a three-part series of articles on helping a child manage fears after a traumatic event. Read the previous article "[Understanding your child's fears.](#)"

Helping your child

You can comfort and reassure your child by communicating openly and sensitively about what happened.

Ask your child what they think has happened. This is an opportunity for you to clear up any misconceptions they may have. If a child knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk to them about their fears.

Help your child talk about the event by letting them know that it is normal to feel worried or upset. Try to listen carefully and understand what they really want to say. Help younger children use words like "angry" and "sad" for their feelings.

Be aware of your own reaction to a traumatic event. Younger children may be unsettled by a parent's strong reaction to a traumatic event. Remember that children often pick up on nonverbal behaviour, so even if you're not talking about your concerns your child may realize that you're upset.

Be patient when your child asks the same question many times. Asking the same question over and over is one way that children "test" what they have heard to find out if it's really true. For this reason, they often find repetition very comforting. Try to be consistent with answers and information.

If your child seems reluctant to talk, ask them to draw pictures of what happened, and talk about the pictures with them. Drawing pictures can be a good way to help children express feelings that are hard to describe.

Encourage a young child to act out their feelings with toys or puppets. Don't be alarmed if they express angry or violent emotions. Instead, use the opportunity to begin a conversation about their worries and fears.

Be honest about your own feelings, but talk to other adults if you feel very anxious about how you'll cope. Children pick up on their parents' emotions and may feel frightened and helpless if they think that adults are feeling that way too.

Consider your child's age, maturity, and development in making decisions about media exposure. It's best to shield very young children from graphic details and pictures in the media because they may not understand these and feel more afraid if they see them. Take the overall maturity and development of other children into account in deciding what they should see. Consider such things as whether your child is easily upset or frightened and how they have reacted in the past to news reports of troubling events.

Watch the news with older children. In most families, it isn't realistic to try to shield older children and teenagers from the news. Even if you turn off the television, they may hear the news from friends or read about it online. It's usually more practical to watch the news with them, talk about what you see and reassure them that you will protect them. Make sure to limit the amount of time your child spends watching the news and be alert for signs that media reports may have triggered fears or behaviour such as sleeplessness.

Encourage a teenager to hide, mute, or unfollow upsetting social media feeds. You and your child can anticipate which TV programs will have disturbing news and try to avoid them or watch them together. But you don't know when a teenager's Facebook, Twitter, or other social media contacts will post or link to upsetting content. So you may want to reassure your child that it's okay to unfollow temporarily some people or groups. Or suggest alternatives to a child who doesn't want to unfollow friends. On Facebook, for example, they can click "Hide this post" when someone posts unwelcome content they don't want to see every time they log on. On Twitter, they can hide some people's posts without unfollowing them by using the "mute" function that's available to all users.

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