

Information about Helping Your Child Cope with Trauma

- 1. The reason trauma affects us so profoundly is that it shatters our assumptions that the world is a safe and fair place, that there is always some kind of meaning in life events. We falsely believe that if we are smart and responsible enough, we can protect ourselves and our children from tragedy.**
- 2. Recovery from trauma means being able to put the experience behind us. For children, this means getting back to the business of being children as soon as possible, and anything adults can do to provide an environment where kids can continue to be kids is helpful in trauma resolution.**
- 3. Children view trauma in a different way than adults do. They lack the ability to appreciate the long-range implications of an event, especially if it was a community trauma and their own family was not personally touched. Their view of the trauma is often based on how they see the adults who are close to them responding. Younger children may be more alarmed if the adults in their lives seem very upset and responding emotionally. Conversely, children may be less impacted if the adults in their lives are calm, reassuring and supportive.**
- 4. Children's reactions to trauma are as individual and different as one child is from another. Some children may have big reactions to small events while others may seem to react minimally to terrible things. There is no right way to respond.**
- 5. When children seem to recover from a traumatic event more quickly than adults it is often a reflection of their ability to focus on the immediate present rather than on the past or future. Especially if they were not personally touched by the event or witnesses to it. They may be able to put it behind them and move on with their lives in a remarkably short period of time.**
- 6. Another reason children may seem to under react to a traumatic event is that they can only tolerate intense feelings for a short period of time. So they experience the upsetting feelings for a brief period of time, then back away from them until they can tolerate the intensity again. So what may look like denial or avoidance to us is really an example of effective coping. Parents need to take advantage of chances to talk about the trauma when their children present the opportunity to them.**
- 7. External events may reactivate the trauma. TV shows, the news, etc. may be reminders or cause distress as it brings up the original trauma. Being prepared for these reminders, whatever their source is the best way to cope with them.**
- 8. Dealing with trauma is not something most of us have much experience with - it's not a "normal" parenting skill. So if you are concerned about your child's reaction or lack thereof, a good way to deal with uncertainty is to check it out**

with someone whose opinion you trust. Your school counselor is a good resource as is your local mental health agency or clinic.

9. While traumas are by definition upsetting, our response to them is what makes them manageable. When events in life seem out of control, the fact that we can control our reactions to them sends an important message to our children. Remaining in emotional control also helps us develop more effective problem solving strategies to protect ourselves as best we can from similar catastrophes.

When Helping a Grieving Child, Please:

- Listen
- Be honest. Never lie or tell half-truths
- Answer their questions. Even the hard ones
- Give the child choices whenever possible
- Encourage consistency and routines
- Talk about and remember the person who died
- Make a child's world safe for grieving
- Expect and allow for all kinds of emotions
- Get out the crayons, pens, pencils, paint, chalk, Play-Doh, clay
- Run, jump, play and find other ways to release big energy and emotions
- Be a model of healthy grief
- Provide affection, reassurance and compassion
- Practice patience
- Support children even if they are in a bad mood
- Expect some children to act younger than their age
- Expect some children to act like little adults
- Help the child at bedtimes. Sleep may become more difficult now
- Encourage healthy meals and drinking plenty of water
- Keep parent-teacher communication open
- Don't force kids to talk
- Take breaks from grief
- Remember that "playing" is grieving for a child
- Seek additional help if needed
- Help children know that they are not alone in their grief and help them identify safe adults at school
- Set limits and rules and enforce them (helps a child to feel safe)
- Remember special days and anniversaries
- Take care of your own grief and practice self-care
- Be available to the child when they need you