

Suggestions for Parents When Responding to a Crisis

If your child is involved in or affected by a tragedy or other type of crisis, there are general guidelines or suggestions that may help you to better understand and respond to the situation. However, you know your child best, and should be alert to his/her individual needs, behaviors, feelings, and perceptions.

A crisis is generally viewed as a temporary state of emotional upset or disorganization. It's characterized by a person's inability to cope with a particular event or situation using customary coping strategies and problem solving skills. The impact on an individual depends on the event or situation and on how that person perceives it in relation to his/her life. Crises may offer the opportunity for significant learning and growth if resolved and integrated into a person's life and functioning, as well as for negative consequences.

Make yourself available and accessible to your child if and when he/she wants to talk. Be flexible and responsive to his/her needs.

Try to maintain as much of a routine and sense of "normalcy" as you can, but be tolerant of temporary changes, upsets, and needs. Do not be too demanding or structured.

Communicate/demonstrate your concern, care, support, understanding, and acceptance. Do not be judgmental or use words like "should" or "must" with respect to his/her feelings and behaviors.

By expressing yourself openly and honestly and displaying your confidence (i.e., that things will improve and that life will go on) and coping ability, you can serve as an important role model for your child and increase the likelihood that he/she will adopt similar behaviors and attitudes.

Listen to your child when he/she wants to talk and try to communicate that you understand and accept what he/she has to say. If your child does not want to talk, do not force discussion, but let him/her know that you are willing to listen whenever the need or desire does arise. Do not assume that your child is not reacting or will not react simply because you do not observe an initial reaction.

Do not try to "rescue" your child or force him/her to feel better. Be patient and allow children to recover at their own pace and in their own way.

Do not try to protect or isolate your child from "threatening" topics or issues, especially those that he/she is trying or needing to deal with in order to work through and learn from the crisis.

Other tips:

- Listen – Don't interrupt, he/she needs to be heard.
- Accept Feelings – They are valid feelings for your child, even though your feelings may not be similar ones.
- Empathize – Let your child know that you recognize his/her sadness, confusion, anger, or whatever feelings he/she has about the tragedy.
- Reassure – Your child is not responsible for what happened.
- Accept – Your child may not want to talk about the trauma right away. Let him/her know you are willing to listen whenever he/she needs to talk about it.

- Tolerant - Be tolerant of temporary changes.
- Maintain – Maintain as much of a routine as possible.
- Additional Activities - Provide additional activities if your child seems to have excess energy.
- Ask for Help - Don't hesitate to ask for help – This help can be sought out from other parents, the school staff, or an outside professional.

Points to consider in discussion:

- Don't be flippant.
- Don't be excitable; emotional control is an important behavior to model.
- Don't preach; preaching can produce anger.
- Don't minimize your child's reactions.
- Don't use jargon; talk in language your child can understand.
- Don't expect to have all the answers to your child's questions and concerns.
- Don't dramatize death.

Look for signs of emotional reactions that may need attention:

- Crying
- Major changes in behavior
- Withdrawal
- Change in a habits
- Excessive daydreaming
- Increased desire to skip school
- Aggression (when not present before)
- Increased distractibility
- Passivity
- Defiance, especially if this was not a problem before
- Lingering sadness (sadness for several days is to be expected, but IMPROVEMENT should be seen within one week to ten days)