

Help Kids Cope with Tragedy

By Dr. Charles Fay

Children have an incredible capacity for strength, and parents can play a powerful role in helping their children cope with horribly difficult events. Here are some practical guidelines:

#1: Be honest about your emotions while modeling strength.

Our children will cope only as well as we do. Children who see their parents overwhelmed with anxiety, fear, and grief also will become overwhelmed. On the other hand, kids will not have an opportunity to learn healthy expression of feelings if parents stuff their feelings inside.

The key is being honest about your emotions while showing that your family remains strong. For example, you might give your child a hug and say:

This is a very sad thing. Sometimes I feel like crying about it. It also makes me mad. But I know that we will be OK...because we are strong!

#2: Limit your child's exposure to media coverage of the event.

Turn the television and radio off when your kids are in the room. Repeated exposure to the visual and spoken images of the tragedy will create more anxiety and fear. Younger children who don't understand that the scenes are being replayed often believe the actual events keep happening over and over.

#3: Give them the facts about the event.

Don't try to keep the tragedy a secret! First, it's simply impossible to do. Second, humans create information when they lack it. When children get bits and pieces of bad news, they "fill in the blanks" with their imagination. Typically their fears, or rumors that float about at school, produce more anxiety than the truth.

Children, even as young as two-years old, may need you to lay out the facts about the event. Tell them the basics, while leaving out the more sensitive details. Remember, your tone of voice must communicate compassion and strength.

#4: Listen, listen, listen.

There is nothing more powerful than an open ear, heartfelt understanding and a warm hug.

#5: Let them know that they are safe.

Our children need to hear about the thousands and thousands of wonderful people who are working day and night to keep us safe. Despite any fears or doubts we may have, our kids need to hear that they are safe.

Make your reassurance short and to the point. When parents spend too much time, too many words, and too many emotions trying to reassure kids that they are safe, it backfires. Your message will be more powerful and believable if it is very brief and business-like:

There are thousands of people working to keep everyone safe. We are going to be OK. Have a good day at school. I love you.

#6: To the greatest extent possible, maintain daily routines.

Daily routines give all of us a sense of predictability, control, and safety. When we stick with them, we also communicate to our youngsters that we are strong enough to keep going... and they are too.

#7: Involve them in helping others.

There are few things more therapeutic than helping others. Even actions that may seem small, like writing letters of support or sending a box of food to rescue workers, can mean a great deal.

An elementary school principal who followed these tips voiced amazement at how they work. "I can't believe how well our school dealt with this yesterday. The teachers were calm, and so were the kids. Everyone is very saddened, but we are going to make it through!"

One last thought: Following these guidelines can help, but it is just as important to take good care of yourself. The healthier you are, the healthier your kids will be.