

# PROJECT CHAI

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## Help for Parents after Tragedy Naomi L. Baum, Ph.D.

Many children are exposed to tragic or traumatic events during the course of their childhood. When tragedy visits a family or community, children may feel vulnerable and threatened in a world that they do not fully understand. The aftermath of such exposure may include but is not limited to increased fear, nightmares, regressive behavior, and aggressive behavior.

The way a child reacts to a traumatic event depends on a number of factors including his or her age, personality, the severity and proximity of the traumatic event and the level of support received from family and friends. You, the parents are the single most important resource for your child's coping during and after the tragedy. Most children, like adults, will recover from without professional psychological help, but are in need of the support of those closest to them. That is why your understanding and support is essential at this time and that you remain sensitive to distress signals your child may express.

Often, during trying times like this, parents are focused on their own distress and loss, and children are ignored and get left by the wayside. Make sure you pay special attention to your child during the aftermath of traumatic events affecting your family or community.

Below, we offer a number of practical suggestions that will help you and your child cope with this kind of crisis situation.

- **Be aware of your own reactions to the event**  
Children work out how to react to a situation by watching the meaningful adults around them including parents, older siblings and teachers. So try, as much as possible, to behave in a calm and calming manner. In order to do this you may wish to share your thoughts and feelings with adult friends or family members before you talk with your child.
- **Devote more attention to your child**  
Extra attention on your part during this difficult time gives your child the opportunity to express his experiences and feel safe. If your child wants to talk about their feelings, be supportive and encouraging. Show your understanding and acceptance of these feelings by explaining that feelings such as fear, anger and guilt are all normal reactions to such an "abnormal" event. Do not tell your child that a feelings is wrong or unacceptable.
- **Be sensitive to your child's level of understanding**  
Adapt the information you provide your child to his age and maturity level. A surplus of information may confuse young children, and cause additional

fear and insecurity. However additional information can often clear up misconceptions. Providing limited information and then allowing for questions is often a good rule of thumb. It is important to encourage conversation but if the child is not interested in talking, do not insist on it.

- **Limit your child's exposure to the media**  
Avoid exposing your child to graphic and live reports from the scene of traumatic events. This is particularly important in the early childhood and younger elementary school age groups. Often parents are so involved in the unfolding drama on television that they are unaware of their young child who may be exposed to radio reports or television footage that will later cause distressing nightmares or thoughts.
- **Try to maintain a normal routine**  
Try to maintain as normal a routine as possible and provide your child with reassuring and realistic messages about his safety. Encouraging return to daily routine is very reassuring to children and carries with it a very strong message of safety in a nonverbal, yet direct way.
- **Be attentive to behaviors that signal distress**  
Pay attention to patterns of play that reenact the trauma again and again, and to complaints about "bad dreams". These behaviors are normal after a traumatic event, and are the child's way of coping with the trauma. However, if there is no change in the intensity and frequency of these behaviors after a month, or if they intensify, professional help should be considered.
- **Be especially attentive to adolescents**  
Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time and special attention should be devoted to adolescents at this time. Special attention should be paid to changes in behavior, sleeping or eating as well as unusual displays of anger. These symptoms should be dealt with immediately, as they generally don't disappear of their own accord without professional treatment.
- **Pay attention to your own emotional state**  
As the main support that your child depends on, you must take good care of yourselves. Keep in touch with family and friends and share your feelings with other adults, particularly those who may have gone through similar experiences. Try to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep and add physical exercise and other fun activities to your routine. And again -- do not hesitate to turn to professional help for either consultation or treatment if it seems to you that you or your child is in need.