



Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND TEACHERS

Adult support and reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time.

Children and youth can face emotional strains after a traumatic event such as a car crash or violence.¹ Disasters also may leave them with long-lasting harmful effects.² When children experience a trauma, watch it on TV, or overhear others discussing it, they can feel scared, confused, or anxious. Young people react to trauma differently than adults. Some may react right away; others may show signs that they are having a difficult time much later. As such, adults do not always know when a child needs help coping. This tip sheet will help parents, caregivers, and teachers learn some common reactions, respond in a helpful way, and know when to seek support.

Possible Reactions to a Disaster or Traumatic Event

Many of the reactions noted below are normal when children and youth are handling the stress right after an event. If any of these behaviors lasts for more than 2 to 4 weeks, or if they suddenly appear later on, these children may need more help coping. Information about where to find help is in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

Very young children may go back to thumb sucking or wetting the bed at night after a trauma. They may fear strangers, darkness, or monsters. It is fairly common for preschool children to become clingy with a parent, caregiver, or teacher or to want to stay in a place where they feel safe. They may express the trauma repeatedly in their play or tell exaggerated stories about what happened. Some children's eating and sleeping habits may change. They also may have aches and pains that cannot be explained. Other symptoms to watch for are aggressive or withdrawn behavior, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and disobedience.

- **Infants and Toddlers, 0–2 years old,** cannot understand that a trauma is happening, but they know when their caregiver is upset. They may start to show the same emotions as their caregivers, or they may act differently, like crying for no reason, withdrawing from people, and not playing with their toys.
- **Children, 3–5 years old,** can understand the effects of trauma. They may have trouble adjusting to change and loss. They may depend on the adults around them to help them feel better.

EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Children and youth in these age ranges may have some of the same reactions to trauma as younger children. Often, younger children want much more attention from parents or caregivers. They may stop doing their school work or chores at home. Some youth may feel helpless and guilty because they cannot take on adult roles as their family or the community responds to a trauma or disaster.

- **Children, 6–10 years old,** may fear going to school and stop spending time with friends. They may have trouble paying attention and do poorly in school overall. Some may become aggressive for no clear reason. Or they may act younger than their age by asking to be fed or dressed by their parent or caregiver.
- **Youth and Adolescents, 11–19 years old,** go through a lot of physical and emotional changes because of their developmental stage. So, it may be even harder for them to cope with trauma. Older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine “I’m okay” or even silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Some may start arguments at home and/or at school, resisting any structure or authority. They also may engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs.

How Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers Can Support Children’s Recovery

The good news is that children and youth are usually quite resilient. Most of the time they get back to feeling okay soon after a trauma. With the right support from the adults around them, they can thrive and recover. The most important ways to help are to make sure children feel connected, cared about, and loved.

- Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children express their emotions through conversation, writing, drawing, and singing. Most children want to talk about a trauma, so let them. Accept their feelings and tell them it is okay to feel sad, upset, or stressed. Crying is often a way to relieve stress and grief. **Pay attention and be a good listener.**
- Adults can ask the teens and youth they are caring for what they know about the event. What are they hearing in school or seeing on TV? Try to watch news coverage on TV or the Internet with them. And, limit access so they have time away from reminders about the trauma. Don’t let talking about the trauma take over the family or classroom discussion for long periods of time. **Allow them to ask questions.**
- Adults can help children and youth see the good that can come out of a trauma. Heroic actions, families and friends who help, and support from people in the community are examples. Children may better cope with a trauma or disaster by helping others. They can write caring letters to those who have been hurt or have lost their homes; they can send thank you notes to people who helped. **Encourage these kinds of activities.**
- If human violence or error caused an event, be careful not to blame a cultural, racial, or ethnic group, or persons with psychiatric disabilities. This may be a good opportunity to talk with children about discrimination and diversity. **Let children know that they are not to blame when bad things happen.**
- It’s okay for children and youth to see adults sad or crying, but try not to show intense emotions. Screaming and hitting or kicking furniture or walls can be scary for children. **Violence can further frighten children or lead to more trauma.³**
- Adults can show children and youth how to take care of themselves. If you are in good physical and emotional health, you are more likely to be readily available to support the children you care about. **Model self-care, set routines, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep, exercise, and take deep breaths to handle stress.**

Tips for Talking With Children and Youth of Different Age Groups After a Disaster or Traumatic Event

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

Give these very young children a lot of cuddling and verbal support:

- Take a deep breath before holding or picking them up, and focus on them, not the trauma.
- Get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using words they can understand.
- Tell them that you still care for them and will continue to take care of them so they feel safe.

EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Nurture children and youth in this age group:

- Ask your child or the children in your care what worries them and what might help them cope.
- Offer comfort with gentle words, a hug when appropriate, or just your presence.
- Spend more time with the children than usual, even for a short while. Returning to school activities and getting back to routines at home is important too.
- Excuse traumatized children from chores for a day or two. After that, make sure they have age-appropriate tasks and can participate in a way that makes them feel useful.
- Support children spending time with friends or having quiet time to write or create art.
- Encourage children to participate in recreational activities so they can move around and play with others.



- Address your own trauma in a healthy way. Avoid hitting, isolating, abandoning, or making fun of children.
- Let children know that you care about them—spend time doing something special with them, and make sure to check on them in a nonintrusive way.

A NOTE OF CAUTION: Be careful not to pressure children to talk about a trauma or join in expressive activities. While most children will easily talk about what happened, some may become frightened. Some may even get traumatized again by talking about it, listening to others talk about it, or looking at drawings of the event. Allow children to remove themselves from these activities, and monitor them for signs of distress.

Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)

TDD: 1-866-889-2647

Website: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator>

MentalHealth.gov

Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>

MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)

(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889

Website: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>

This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990—Text “TalkWithUs” to 66746

Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Toll-Free: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

Website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/how.cfm>

Additional Behavioral Health Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/traumaJustice>

This behavioral health resource can be accessed by visiting the SAMHSA website and then selecting the related link.

Administration for Children and Families

Website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

When Children, Youth, Parents, Caregivers, or Teachers Need More Help

In some instances, a child and his or her family may have trouble getting past a trauma. Parents or caregivers may be afraid to leave a child alone. Teachers may see that a student is upset or seems different. It may be helpful for everyone to work together. Consider talking with a mental health professional to help identify the areas of difficulty. Together, everyone can decide how to help and learn from each other. If a child has lost a loved one, consider working with someone who knows how to support children who are grieving.⁴ Find a caring professional in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

¹ National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (n.d.). Traffic safety facts, 2003 data: Children. (DOT HS 809 762). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved from <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/809762.pdf>.

^{2,4} National Commission on Children and Disasters. (2010). National Commission on Children and Disasters: 2010 report to the President and Congress. (AHRQ Publication No. 10-MO37). Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <http://archive.ahrq.gov/prep/nccdreport/nccdreport.pdf>.

³ Children's Bureau. (2010). Child maltreatment 2009. Washington, DC: Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2009>.



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Preliminary Messaging to Raise Awareness about the Significant Impact of the Presidential Election on Youth Health and Well-Being

Since the presidential election on Tuesday, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago has become aware of several reports that children and youth are experiencing significant distress. Youth who have been affected include frequently marginalized youth, such as LGBTQ youth and refugee/immigrant and undocumented children and youth, but may not be limited to these groups.

For refugee/immigrant children, fear of being forcibly separated from family through deportation is clearly traumatic and threatening, especially due to many immigrant populations’ emphasis on the centrality of family. Many youth risked their lives to come to the United States to reunite with family members and have themselves often escaped traumatic and life-threatening events in their home countries that propelled them to seek refuge among family and relatives in the U.S. The threat of separation from family, or of the return to life-threatening circumstances, generates a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. For LGBTQ youth, they are frightened that civil rights and broader social acceptance that has been advancing in recent years are at risk. Children of same-gender couples may also fear the dissolution of their parents’ marriage and subsequent loss of guardianship. These fears increase a sense of isolation and hopelessness for this group. As a result, college and community counseling centers are being overwhelmed with the volume of calls for support, and schools are reporting instances of hate speech, racist vandalism, and having to cancel classes due to safety concerns.

There is evidence that some students have interpreted the political rhetoric as giving them permission to bully other students of color and minority status. Youth who are victimized by bullies are at risk for severe mental health concerns. Among these youth especially vulnerable are:

- Visible minorities – due to skin color, style of dress (e.g., hijab)
- Gender non-conforming youth
- Refugee/immigrant children and adolescents as this population may not receive the help they need as many of these families do not seek traditional mental health services and lack access to other sources of support
- Recipients of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) or “dreamers”. For many of these youth, the U.S. is the only country they have ever known and they are scared of both educational/employment disruption and deportation to their countries of origin, many of which are plagued by violence, and where they would be completely alone, without family, education, or employment.
- Those whose family members also may be undocumented and experiencing the same distress
- And those with pre-existing risk factors for suicidal behavior, such as:
 - Depression and anxiety disorders
 - Prior suicide attempts or non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors
 - Substance use
 - Impulsive aggressive behavior
 - Socially withdrawn/isolated

IMPORTANT STEPS ADULTS CAN TAKE TO SUPPORT YOUTH

- 1. Model positive coping and stay calm.** Communicate with your words and your behavior that you will keep them safe.
- 2. Ensure and promote safety.**
 - Many of the racist and hateful things people say or do are not only wrong, but also against the law. Reach out to authorities and leaders who can help hold individuals accountable for promoting hatred.
 - Help youth identify safe spaces and safe adults who can speak up on their behalf.
- 3. Connect with social support and decrease sense of isolation**
 - Universities and schools can offer circles of support, and other safe spaces for students to express concerns and seek support.
 - Connect with faith communities, a source of support for many refugee/immigrant communities.
- 4. Raise awareness of organized support for refugee/immigrant/LGBTQ rights.** Just knowing that there are organizations who will safeguard their rights can be reassuring to youth. Increasing their sense of control and influence over their environment and their future promotes hope. By donating to or volunteering with these organizations, adults and youth both increase social support and sense of control over their situation.
 - It's important not to challenge or dismiss a young person's fears that prejudice will harm them. However, reassure them that there are people and organizations who will help.
 - Affirm LGBTQ identities by actively showing support for LGBTQ youths' orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Support can include helping the young person attend LGBTQ youth groups, advising or attending the LGBTQ student groups at your school if you are an educator, or including a young person's LGBTQ friends in family events if you are parent or family member.
- 5. Promote healthy coping.** Good ways for youth to cope include:
 - Keeping family and school routines
 - Relaxation practice
 - Talking and spending time with family, friends, or faith communities
 - Distraction
 - Using humor
 - Scheduling pleasant activities
 - Exercising
 - Writing in a journal
 - Being creative or artistic
 - Avoiding substance use and isolation
 - Limiting media use to avoid repetitive images and messages that remind them of bad events.
- 6. Familiarize yourself with signs of distress and signs of potential suicidality:**
 - Withdrawing from family and friends
 - Dramatic mood change

- Threatening to kill him/herself
- Talking, thinking, or writing about death or suicide
- Feeling hopeless or helpless
- Unusually reckless behaviors
- Giving away prized possessions
- Exposure to others' suicidal behavior

7. Link with available services (See below)

KEY WAYS ADULTS SHOULD COMFORT CHILDREN

1. Remind children that 'Adults around you will protect you.'

- Kids are scared by adult reactions, like strong emotions, violence, or talking about moving to other countries. This makes kids think that adults in their life are not in control and cannot keep them safe.
- It is important for parents to model taking care of themselves and good coping skills.

2. Remind children we have a government system of checks and balances.

- There are democratic processes in local, state, and federal governments.
- Lawmakers can use democratic processes to prevent individuals from making decisions alone.

3. Remind them there is still hope, and people will fight for them.

- The United States is a country of immigrants.
- Our country is founded on the principles of freedom of religion.
- Human and civil rights organizations will fight for individuals' rights and to prevent unlawful decisions.
- We accept different opinions in a democracy, and individuals should stand up for what they believe is right.

Resources

Support for Youth

- Crisis Text Line
<http://www.crisistextline.org>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- The Trevor Project
<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>
- To Write With Love On Their Arms
<https://twloha.com>
- Center on Halsted
<http://centeronhalsted.org>

Support for Family/Parents/Caregivers

- Look Through Their Eyes
www.lookthroughtheireyes.org
- Child Mind Institute
<http://childmind.org/article/youre-worried-suicide>
- Parents.com
<http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/everything-kids/tips-for-talking-about-the-outcome-of-the-election-with-kids>
- Today Show Segment:
<http://www.today.com/parents/how-talk-your-kids-about-election-results-t104827>
- Huffington Post: What do we tell the children?
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-should-we-tell-the-children_us_5822aa90e4b0334571e0a30b

Support for Professionals working with Youth

- Teaching Tolerance (resources for teachers)
<http://www.tolerance.org/election2016>
- Human Rights Campaign (help for LGBTQ youth)
<http://www.hrc.org/blog/after-election-lgbtq-youth-are-panicked-heres-what-we-can-do-to-help-them>
- Youth Suicide Prevention Program (information on youth suicide)
http://yspp.org/about_suicide/statistics.htm
- Illinois Safe Schools (resources for creating gender inclusive schools)
<http://illinoissafeschools.org>

Human and Civil Rights Organizations

NATIONAL

- Immigrant Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights
<http://www.icirr.org/>
- American Civil Liberties Union: works to defend individual rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution
<https://www.aclu.org/action>
- Anti-defamation League: fights against anti-Semitism and bigotry as one of the largest civil rights organizations in the country
<http://www.adl.org/combating-hate/>

- Border Angels: all-volunteer non-profit that advocates for immigration reform and social justice focusing on the U.S.-Mexico border. It offers educational and awareness programs and migrant outreach programs to San Diego County's immigrant population.
<http://www.borderangels.org/>
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: works to promote the civil rights of people of color and to eliminate race-based discrimination
<http://www.naacp.org/about-us/>
- NAACP Legal Defense Fund: fights for racial justice through litigation, advocacy and education
<http://www.naacpldf.org/ways-get-involved>
- **National Immigration Law Center** is dedicated to fighting for the rights of low-income immigrants through litigation, policy analysis and advocacy, and various other methods
<https://www.nilc.org/get-involved/>
- National Immigration Forum: is another leading immigrant advocacy group that offers various programs to integrate immigrants into the workforce and obtain citizenship
<http://immigrationforum.org/about/>
- Lambda Legal: mission is to achieve full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and those with HIV through impact litigation, education, and public policy work.
<http://www.lambdalegal.org/issues/transgender-rights>

LOCAL

- Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights: works to protect the best interests of children who come to the U.S. on their own
<http://theyoungcenter.org/>
- Illinois Refugee Mental Health Task Force: *a volunteer task force committed to ensuring access and promoting awareness around mental health needs and services for refugees and immigrants in Illinois*
<http://www.ilrmh.org/>
- Illinois Business Immigration Coalition: provides a voice for Illinois businesses in support of common sense immigration reform that supports Illinois' economic recovery, provides Illinois companies with both the high-skilled and low-skilled talent they need, and promotes the integration of immigrants into our economy as consumers, workers, entrepreneurs and citizens
<http://www.illinoisbic.biz/>
- Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Ad-hoc Committee for Refugee/Immigrant Children & Trauma: The ICTC is a voluntary collaboration of organizations that tracks emerging trends, promotes education among professionals and the public, and offers support to a broad network of agencies that work with and for children and families who experience trauma.
www.lookthroughtheireyes.org
- National Immigrant Justice Center: dedicated to ensuring human rights protections and access to justice for all immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers
<http://www.immigrantjustice.org/>