

## After a Traumatic Experience: What to Do for Your Children

Parents try their best to protect their children from tragic events. However, sometimes frightening and overwhelming events invade a child's world. Suddenly a child's vision of his/her world as safe and predictable is abruptly shattered. As a parent, you must first recognize that dealing with tragedy is a process. Ask your child what they think, know, feel or fear before offering guidance. The following information is meant to be a guide in talking with your children, but if intense fears persist, please seek professional assistance.

- Recognize that you have experienced the same event, so take care of your emotional needs first. This is critical in conveying to your child that everything will be "okay". In order for them to feel safe, they need to sense that you can cope with this event as well.
- Children can benefit by expressing their feelings to a parent who is genuinely listening. Listen carefully as your child recounts their version of the story including their fears and feelings. This brings them a sense that you understand their thoughts so that they can feel safe to talk more.
- It is *very* important to let children know their feelings of fear or anger are a natural reaction to a traumatic event. Rebuild self-confidence by finding ways to praise your child for their actions, for talking with you, for sharing their feelings, for wanting to help and/or for expressing concern for others.
- When conveying tragic news to children, share the facts without overwhelming your child with

information. Too much detail can be especially scary. They mostly want to know that everyone will be safe and "okay." The goal is to deal with emotions first, then deal with the facts.

- If talking is not working, find alternate ways to help your child express his/her feelings. Drawing pictures, writing or role-playing a positive "happy ending" can be reassuring to a child.
- Include your child in future safety precautions to assist him/her in feeling safe and secure. This could include making sure the house is locked or where to meet in case there is a frightening event and you are both separated. Taking action can assist in regaining a sense of security.
- If your child chooses to watch the tragic news on TV, set limits. Sit with your child and convey the stories of heroism and unity. Again, reassure your child that preventative measures are currently in force.
- Re-establishing regular routines as soon as possible is helpful. Children are comforted in knowing their daily schedule is predictable.
- Plan a future event (vacation, time together, family outing) and express your excitement about following through with this plan.

Recovering from tragedy is a process and through time, and with support, children will eventually heal. Talk to your children daily and affirm to them that you are there to listen and provide ongoing support.