

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMA – For Christian Families*

In the midst of trauma and crisis, one of our common reactions as parents is to shield our children from it. Children sense our stress and that of others around them; we must deal openly and honestly with the questions they may have. So, what is the Christian response?

We must **let our children know that God is sovereign**, that He knows where each of us is, and that He cares for us. *1 Peter 5:7* tells us to cast all our anxiety upon Him, because He cares for us. *Psalm 47* tells us that God is King over all the earth; that He reigns over the nations.

A young child can be traumatized not only by hearing that a playmate's loved one has been harmed, but also by unintentionally encountering jarring images. In either case, **do not underestimate** the concern it can cause a child. The younger the child, the more vulnerable he or she is.

1. **Listen to your child!** Ask what they know about the event and find out what *their* perceptions are. Don't jump to conclusions. Parents should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event, spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.
2. **Reassure the child** that their feelings are normal. Do not try to change their feelings or say they should not feel that way. Let them know that you will not judge, tease or make fun of them about what they tell you.
3. **Allow** children to express feelings and share yours with them if and when appropriate. Address the irrationality and suddenness of the event or disaster. Children and adults need their feelings validated. It may be useful to have children paint, draw or write about the event.
4. **Reassure** children that they are safe and loved and that people are doing everything possible to make this a safer world (give examples of police, firefighters, rescuers, nurses, doctors, etc. who may be on TV or in communities helping).
5. **Review family safety procedures.** If the family has none take this time to establish new ones.
6. **Be honest and provide accurate facts** about the event. Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.
7. **Address death** concretely and factually.
8. **Tune in** to a child's thoughts without planting seeds of concern. Don't transfer your own fears to your children. Respond to safety issues with calm and reassurance. Often parents' despair interferes with a child's ability to heal. We can be honest about how we feel but at the same time be sure that we are not overly anxious and give them more cause for concern. Children are usually most concerned with their immediate loved ones and their safety. We must be reassuring and calm.
9. **Help** children return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

10. **Spend extra time** with each child doing something fun or relaxing and have a family time everyday.
11. **Remember** the importance of touch and hugs.
12. **Tolerate** regressive behaviors and accept signs of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the traumatic event.
13. **Make sure** all caregivers in the child's life such as teacher, babysitters, daycare providers, friends, and neighbors are aware of the impact of the event on the child.
14. **Watch for signs of repetitive** play or reenactments of the event. (These are normal reactions and can be addressed by trained trauma and mental health specialists).
15. **Praise** and recognize responsible behavior.
16. **Connect the child** and family to support groups, resources, child trauma specialists or other helpful community resources that can:
 - Provide information
 - Provide direction
17. **Talk in hopeful terms** about the future. This can help a child rebuild trust and faith in his own future and the world.
18. **Look at their drawings.** Facial expressions and colors can communicate how they're feeling or what they're processing. If a child who has encountered something traumatic, it also can stimulate conversation.
19. **Observe their play.** Does it tell you anything about what they are thinking or feeling? If a child seems unsettled, initiating secure role-plays about home life can be comforting.
20. **Listen carefully** to their questions; watch their facial expressions when they ask them. Wait five seconds before answering; often, more concerns will come out. A four-year-old who overhears an older child saying something dramatic or frightening may not think to mention it, even if he or she finds it deeply disturbing. They may also feel hesitant to express concerns or feel guilty about having seen something disturbing on television. Make yourself available for questions, and limit answers to the bare facts. Do not elaborate. Children are not developmentally capable of processing the more dramatic images and information currently in the media.
21. **Pray**, with them, for the families that have lost loved ones. Read Scripture together as you pray.

*** Other religious groups may substitute appropriate religious teachings and references that will support opportunities for comfort and healing.**

Sources: National Organization for Victim Assistance, Carol Hacker, Ph.D., CTS, Jayne Crisp, CTS, CVAS and *the Pastoral and Children's Ministry staff of McLean Presbyterian Church, September 11, 2001.*(McLean, Virginia)