

ABOUT PLEASE TOUCH MUSEUM

Please Touch Museum, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is committed to helping young children understand complex ideas and issues. Disasters, whether hurricanes, floods or wars, create loss. Coping with the loss of a loved one, a home, special treasures, expectations, and dreams is incredibly stressful. Continual stress from severe life disruptions can lead to feelings of depression, helplessness, fear, anger, and fatigue in very young children.

The following suggestions were compiled to help you and your children cope with the effects of a disaster. While these suggestions are addressed to parents, they are also intended to be a resource for anyone who cares for young children. When communicating with the children you care about, it is important that you speak from your own beliefs and understandings. These suggestions therefore do not presume a particular position or offer specific answers for you to give your children.

For more information, please visit us at:
www.pleasetouchmuseum.org



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BOOKS ADDRESSING EARLY CHILDHOOD CONCERNS

Goodbye House
By Frank Asch

Why?
Nikolai Popov

Why Did It Happen
By Janice Cohn

Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?
By Martin Waddell and
Barbara Firth



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SUGGESTIONS FOR

HELPING YOUNG

CHILDREN COPE

With a Disaster



Why is it difficult to talk about a disaster with your children?

As a parent you feel a great responsibility to protect your children from many things in this world that can hurt them. But for issues such as life and death, natural and unnatural disasters, you have no control over what happens. It is important to remember that you can help your children make sense of events and feel good about themselves even when no one has control over the events.

An additional problem arises in trying to explain these catastrophes in a way that young children can understand. It is important to make clear to your children that it is hard even for adults to understand why disastrous events happen, but you will do the best that you can to help them understand. As you talk with your children remember that all children have their own individual style and ability to handle adversity.

What helps young children deal with a life crisis?

When trying to help a young child deal with any complex topic, there are several things to consider. First, children have very short attention spans. They may only want to talk about a serious topic for a minute or two, and then go off to play or do something else. This does not indicate a lack of interest or concern, rather, it is because they will not stay on any topic, no matter how important, for very long.

Second, you must find the right level of information for your children. For many children, talking about and reliving a distressing event right after it occurs is both natural and healing. Without opportunities to talk about the event children may keep silent and suppress their feelings due to fear or concern about upsetting loved ones. You can get clues about what children are thinking by paying attention to their conversation, play, and other behavior, and then start discussions based on these concerns. These conversations may be most successful if held in a quiet environment with few distractions. Bedtime is not usually a good time for discus-

sions that go beyond reassurance and good feelings. Too much information or emphasis on a difficult topic may give some children more than they can comfortably handle at one time. Young children need time to think and grieve about the event. While keeping the avenues for communication open, also be ready to accept that the details of your children's daily lives may at times be more compelling to them than larger life events.

Third, you may notice a change in the themes expressed in your children's play. For instance, there may be more expressions of anger or direct reference to the recent disaster. There may also be more subtle indications of stress or fears, including more arguments between children or more expressions of a need for control. Play, particularly pretend play and art work, serves as an important resource for children to work through issues. If you find some of your children's themes disturbing, you may want to sit down with them, outside of the play situation itself, and talk about what you have seen, describing their behavior and reflecting on it together.

What are the most important things to communicate to your child?

Your most important job as a parent is to reassure your children. This does not mean that you should assure them that everything is all right and that they are silly to worry, because everything is not all right. The following are three ways that you can honestly and effectively reassure young children.

1. Children need to hear that family and friends who love them are still there to protect and take care of them. When children feel scared or confused, they often feel alone and vulnerable, and a parent leaving, even for a short time, can be very frightening. This is a time for extra intimacy with your child, lots of physical affection and patience, and respect for the fears and concerns that surface. Children need to hear that it is all right to be afraid and confused at times, and that grown-ups feel that way too. But follow up with assurances that you will be there to help them understand their feelings and thoughts.
2. They need to know that it is all right to ask questions. Wondering about things and looking for answers is a good way to make sense of them. You should encourage questions and opinions from your

children and respond to them as legitimate and important. Some children may also respond to their own fears and doubts by talking about a disturbing event as if it were a joke. If your own children do so, you can help them find more constructive ways to express their feelings

3. Children's questions need to be answered with accurate information and honest expressions of opinion. The amount and complexity of information should be geared to the child's age and interest, but every child, no matter what age, needs honest answers. If you do not know how to answer a question, tell your child that you do not know the answer, but that you will try to find one as soon as you learn more about what is going on. Questions on death need to be answered with support and simple directness as they arise. Children need the reassurance that loss by death does not mean that they are being punished or that they will be abandoned by others close to them.

How can you best deal with the presence of a disaster in your life?

1. All young children, but especially very young children who cannot understand much about the actual disaster itself, may respond more to the changes in parents' moods and daily routines than the event itself. It is important to realize that you need to spend more time than ever interacting with your children and modeling positive ways of coping with adversity. Returning to a normal daily routine, including school and community-based activities, will further your children's feeling of security and stability. Children will also feel that their world has become safe again if they can visit their favorite playground, park or museum.
2. You can help your children by monitoring and interpreting what they see and hear about the disaster. There are many words used in broadcasts and articles as well as television images that are confusing to young children. If you are watching a news broadcast together, ask your children if they understand. If they do not, explain the story to them. Children's imaginations, especially when fed by outside sources of words and images, can often create far worse scenarios than reality. For your own continual news information, listen to the radio {less likely to be understood by children} or watch television after the children are in bed.

3. This is a time when you are feeling more stress, and so are your children. Presenting them with ways to relieve that stress can help them deal with it better. Providing a physical outlet is particularly helpful for children with high energy levels. In addition, physical affection, humor, and having a good time relieve stress and increase feelings of security for young children. Recognize that stress can trigger aggressive outbursts, bed-wetting, and food and sleep disorders; they should be treated as symptoms during a period of stress rather than stubbornness or immaturity. Children experiencing nightmares or feeling fearful at night may be comforted by a night light, stuffed animal or doll, or music from a bedside radio. Some children may feel less vulnerable if they have a flashlight by their bed and a bell or whistle to call a parent. If they do awake with fears during the night, sitting with them provides comfort and support and helps to lessen their frightening feelings. When children have to move from their home, they feel less helpless and confused if they can take with them some "transitional objects," such as a favorite toy, pillow, or blanket. If that is not possible, try to replace these items with similar ones as soon as you can. Even though children are amazingly strong, you may want to consider professional help for any child who shows severe persistent symptoms of stress.
4. Children, like adults, feel better about overwhelming events when they can do something to help. It is important to give children opportunities to contribute to the rebuilding process, even if it is only a small task of short duration. Being able to join with others increases a child's awareness that they are not alone and helpless and that there is strength through family and community cooperation.

We hope that the suggestions offered here have given you ideas about how you can help young children respond to disaster. In the end, you will help your children the most by listening to them carefully and compassionately and by responding simply and honestly. In fact, life crises can strengthen a child's ability to cope and give them the self-knowledge that they are capable of successfully surviving frightening experiences.

Marzy Sykes, PhD.

Adapted from "Helping Young Children Respond to War"
by Suzanne Gaskins, PhD.