



# Tragic Times. Healing Words: How to Help Your Child Cope

## **Acknowledge that bad things happen.**

First, it is important to tell the truth and acknowledge that bad things do happen. If preschoolers do not ask questions, they do not need to be told about the recent events. If they are exposed to the event say that they are safe with you and that good people are in charge. If your older child asks questions, explain what happened and use words to describe the events based on what you feel he or she can handle. Being honest is important in maintaining your child's trusting relationship with you and other adults.

## **Reassure your child that your family is secure and stay in close contact.**

Children need to be reassured that their parents, teachers, and caretakers have this situation under control. In times like these, it's important to maintain close contact with your children. Reassure them that everyone in your family is OK and tell them that you—their parents and caregivers—will keep them safe. Hugs help too! Your children may be clingy or more in need of attention than at other times. That's OK. Try to spend time with them and be reassuring about your presence and their safety.

## **Listen to your child in each and every way.**

Your child may express her feelings through actions rather than words. For example, a child may develop a new fear of loud noises or be less interested in playing with other children. Acknowledge children's feelings. When talking to your child about the events it is important to remember that all children are different and that your goal is to be patient, understanding, reassuring, and accepting of children's feelings. Some children may have shown few emotional reactions and many may not ask *any* questions about the events. Others will bounce in and out of feelings of grief or worry. If you have a very young child who does not appear to be impacted by the event, she should not be given information about the events. However, if you have an older child, or a young child who does have questions or concerns, you can help her by giving simple answers that are appropriate to her age.

## **Try to keep a normal routine.**

Children will fare better if life is as stable and predictable as possible. To the degree possible, stick to your usual schedules and routines. Teachers, relatives, and other adult friends can help children by being available to them. This will help children to keep calm and restore their sense of safety.

## **Limit exposure to news media.**

Preschoolers should be shielded from exposure to the events. Try to turn off your television and radio when they are close by, and limit their exposure to newspaper images and other media sources. Such images are frightening and may cause nightmares and/or be confusing. If you are unable to prevent your young child from seeing media depictions, help her to discern the reality of what is being depicted.

## **Point out that good things can come out of the bad things that happen.**

In addition to reassuring your child that his environment is secure, he can be given the message that sometimes good things can come out of bad events. Look for stories in the news to tell your child about the heroes that are in his world. For example, how quickly the GFPD and others found a suspect and how quickly our community reacted to keep our kids safe.

## **Give your child the opportunity to help others.**

Helping others is a wonderful way to help children maintain a sense of control and realize that one person can make a difference. Ask children what they would like to do to help out. Children intuitively know what they would like to do. Discuss ways that they can help keep themselves and others safe.

## **Share your feelings.**

Children look to adults for their reaction. With a school age child, you can talk about your own fear and sadness. Knowing that you have similar feelings will legitimize your child's own feelings. However, it is important to manage your reactions because anxiety can be contagious. Although this is a sad and stressful time for all of us, it will not be helpful for your child to see you unravel. Spend time together engaged in soothing activities such as holding hands, singing songs, taking a walk, or sharing a cup of hot chocolate.

## **When Does My Child Need Professional Help?**

*The behaviors listed below are normal grief reactions. Be concerned if you don't see these symptoms decrease in one to two weeks. Call your school's counselor for information and support.*

1. When sadness doesn't pass.
  2. If they avoid school beyond the initial grief period.
  3. If they appear to lose interest in favorite activities.
  4. If the disturbing thoughts continue. Sleep disturbances.
  5. If regression (behaving younger than their years: thumb sucking, needing to sleep with parent) continues.
  6. If anger outbursts interfere with home/friendships.
  7. If they express suicidal thoughts. Suicidal thoughts always require immediate action.
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