

How to Respond to Children Affected by Tragedy was developed to support adults (parents, grandparents, early childhood educators and others who care for children) in creating a safe and reassuring environment for children following a traumatic event (specifically the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers, September 11, 2001).

Maintaining comforting routines and regular daily activities combined with encouraging conversation, responsive flexibility, opportunities for expressive play and attention to behavior that indicates stress in children from one to 18 years of age are recommended.

Early childhood programs will also find information regarding steps that may be taken to support staff in time of disaster or tragedy. The following phone numbers provide additional help from local mental health professionals; the websites offer access to more extensive resources.

Mental Health Referral Hotlines:

New York City	(212) 995-5825
Nassau County	(516) 504-4357
Orange County	(845) 294-9355
Putnam County	(845) 278-2100
Rockland County	(845) 364-8976
Suffolk County	(631) 751-7500
Westchester County	(914) 995-5237

Rest of New York State Contact your county department of mental health

New Jersey	(800) 382-6717
Connecticut	(800) 446 7348

Suicide Crisis Telephone Numbers for New York State by County is a list of suicide crisis phone numbers including numbers for local county mental health clinics or the mental health units of hospitals, as these are the only places equipped to handle crisis calls in some counties.

<http://www.omh.state.ny.us/omhweb/speak/speakcrisisnumbers%5Fbak.htm>

For additional information:

New York State homepage www.state.ny.us

NYS Council on Children and Families www.ccf.state.ny.us

NYS Office of Mental Health www.omh.state.ny.us

The brochure was developed by the Council on Children and Families in collaboration with Family Communications Inc., The Child Witness to Violence Project of the Boston Medical Center, the New York State Offices of Mental Health and Children and Family Services.

Guidelines for Responding to Children Who are Affected by a Tragedy



The following steps are guidelines to use when responding to children affected by a tragedy:

Validate the child's feelings.

Reflect back the emotions that the child conveys. If a child appears to be angry or frightened by what s/he saw, you can say, "That sounds scary," or "You seem to be upset, tell me more."

Consider the effects of the child's story on others. Are other children listening?

Do they seem upset? Do other children know of the tragedy? What exactly do they know? You can be simple and honest without being graphic or going into detail. Children need to know that it is okay to talk about scary events. However, teachers need to use their judgment to decide when to conduct a discussion in the group and when it is more appropriate to talk to a child one-on-one.

Give the child permission to tell the story.

If a child seems willing to talk, ask neutral questions to facilitate storytelling: "What happened next?" "Then what?" "Did you know the person who got hurt?" Do not ask questions if a child seems uncomfortable or unwilling to talk further. It is important to respect a child's right to talk as much or as little as s/he would like.

Model for the child that it is okay to say, "I'm scared."

For example, you might say something like, "If I had seen that, I think that would have scared me," or "Many people who have seen this are frightened," or "Let's find the pictures of the people who are helping."

Start with what the child knows and thinks.

You do not have to supply information about a tragedy. Talking with children about how they feel provides an opportunity to correct distortions about the specifics of an event.

Reassure the child that adults are there to help him or her feel safe.

Children need to know that they are safe. When young children are affected by a tragedy, they interpret it from their own point of view. They might think, "Will that happen to me?" They need to be reassured that adults will do everything they can to protect them.

Let the child know that you are interested in what s/he has to say.

Even if you don't have all the answers, it is important for a child to be able to tell his or her story. Being able to confide in a trusted adult about the details of a scary event is the first step toward feeling in control.

Reflect back the emotions the child expresses.

Reflecting back the emotions that a child feels lets that child know s/he has been heard. It can also create an opportunity to talk about how s/he feels. Even if this doesn't happen right away, you have identified yourself as someone who talks about feelings, and the child may take you up on your offer at a later time.

Establish eye contact and provide facial expressions and gestures.

Get down to the child's level to listen to him or her. Our facial expressions and our body language express more than our words, and they let that child know s/he was heard.

Remain non-judgmental about what the child tells you.

Resist making judgments about what a child says.

Show interest in what a child tells you without probing for more information.

Listen to what a child says, acknowledging and respecting what the child feels, and correcting distortions if necessary.

Be alert to other changes in behavior that suggest stress.

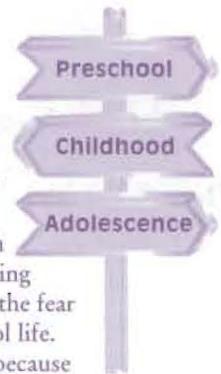
Is the child exhibiting behavior that indicates s/he is stressed? Is s/he more aggressive or less outgoing than s/he used to be? Remember, children tell us what is bothering them with their actions as much as they do with their words.

Let the child know that you are available for more conversation and support.

Some children are not always ready to talk. It is important that you create opportunities for them to do so. Children will come to you for comfort when they are ready to share their thoughts. Children should never be forced to talk.

Behavioral Signals

Generally the world for small children is predictable, stable and served by dependable people. Any disruption in stability causes stress. The two most frequent indicators that children are stressed are **CHANGE** in behaviors and **REGRESSION** of behaviors. Children can change their behavior and react by doing things that are not in keeping with their usual style. Behaviors seen in earlier phases of development such as thumb sucking and regression in toileting may reappear. Age groups differ in reactions. For example, loss of prized possessions, especially pets, hold greater meaning during middle childhood. Of concern to adolescents during/after a major disaster is the fear related to their own body (intactness) and disruption of peer relationships and school life. Adolescents feel their growing independence from parents and family is threatened because the family needs to pull together and less independence is allowed. While adolescents desire independence, they still need the comfort and support of parents and family. Encouraging teens to participate in community service and peer support programs within their own school will help them feel they are aiding others as well as themselves.



Normal Behavior vs. Stressed Behavior

Preschool Ages 1-5

Normal Reactions

Thumb sucking, bedwetting
 lacking self-control; no sense of time; wanting to exhibit independence (2+)
 fear of the dark or animals, night terror
 clinging to parents
 curious, explorative
 loss of bladder/bowel control
 speech difficulties
 changes in appetite

Possible Stressful Reactions

uncontrollable crying
 trembling with fright, immobile
 running aimlessly
 excessive clinging, fear of being left alone
 regressive behavior
 marked sensitivity to loud noises, weather
 more acute fear of the dark
 confusion, irritability
 loss of appetite, stomach aches, nausea
 withdrawal

Consider Referral for Professional Assistance

excessive withdrawal
 does not respond to special attention
 extensive behavior difficulties
 excessive fears
 extreme fears that interfere with daily routines
 persistent complaints of vague physical symptoms
 marked changes in eating, and/or sleeping
 refusal to be left by parents

Middle Childhood Ages 5-11

irritability
 whining
 clinging
 aggression, questioning authority, trying new behaviors for "fit"
 overt competition with siblings for parents' attention

marked regressive behaviors
 sleep problems
 obsessive preoccupation with weather safety
 headache, nausea, visual or hearing problems
 irrational fears and increased anxiety
 angry outbursts
 speech difficulties

excessive withdrawal
 does not respond to special attention
 extensive behavior difficulties
 excessive fears
 marked changes in eating, and/or sleeping
 extreme fears that interfere with daily routines

The Importance of Play . . .

Particularly in times of stress children need to be encouraged to express themselves through play. It is easy for parents to become absorbed with the events surrounding a tragedy and not understand how children process these experiences. For example, in response to the World Trade Center disaster, children might play by building block structures and knocking them over. Parents may see this behavior as inappropriate and uncaring, but it is a child's way of attempting to understand what happened.



The following are guidelines to help children express themselves:

Children need to PLAY

Play is a natural way children work on their feelings and concerns. Through play, children learn about themselves, others and the world around them. Play can be especially healing for children who witness violence because it gives them ways to deal with their feelings, fears and concerns.

PLAY helps children express themselves.

Children who witness violence can feel overwhelmed, scared and anxious when feelings remain bottled up inside them. The energy that it takes to hold in intense feelings robs children of the energy they need to play, learn and grow. Play gives children a safe way to express these scary thoughts and feelings. Children with limited verbal ability can often express complicated thoughts and feelings through their play as well.

Children need large blocks of time to PLAY.

Children need time to recreate and rework their experiences. It takes time for them to negotiate roles and develop richer themes. With limited time to play, children tend to wander around aimlessly. At these times, it helps for a supportive adult to engage a child in an activity that sparks the child's attention.

PLAY allows children to have some control over their feelings about scary events.

When children witness violence, they may feel that they are the helpless bystanders in a world that is out of control. But when children play, they are in charge of what happens. They can rework a scary event by playing it over and over, taking on different roles and understanding it in new ways that can allow them to reach a positive resolution to their story.

PLAY helps adults understand a child's needs.

By carefully observing children's play, teachers can gain insight into how children are experiencing and perceiving certain events. With that knowledge, adults are better able to give information and support in a way that best matches the child's needs.

PLAY creates an opportunity for dialogue.

A child's drawings or play can be the start of a dialogue with an adult who can ask questions and help children make meaning of their complex feelings and concerns. Sometimes teachers can help by joining in the play. They can try asking children to give them a role, and, following the child's lead, ask how their role should be carried out. Teachers can also notice new directions, changes in levels of intensity or expression, and when play becomes disorganized.



When Tragedy Affects Your Center or Program . . .

Staff meetings about the tragedy should allow staff to:

- ◆ Share knowledge and positive strategies with one another;
- ◆ Clear up any misconceptions and exaggerations about the tragedy;
- ◆ Talk about their feelings about the tragedy;
- ◆ Ask for help in feeling safe if they need it;
- ◆ Ask for specific security measures which might make them feel safer;
- ◆ Discuss whether or not the regular operations of the school or center need to be altered to help them feel more safe.

Some additional information:

- ◆ Respect personal styles of participating in meetings that discuss the tragedy.
- ◆ If you are personally upset about the tragedy, let your site director know.
- ◆ Staff members who feel overwhelmed by the tragedy may have a hard time helping a child or family member. This needs to be brought to the attention of the program director.
- ◆ Staff directors need to follow up with staff in the following weeks and months to discover if staff are feeling safer or if they need further support.
- ◆ Talking about tragedy in a group can be helpful, calming, and restore a sense of control if people have been frightened.
- ◆ Without strong leadership, however, such meetings can do the opposite: They can leave staff feeling helpless and paralyzed.
- ◆ Site directors and principals need to use calm judgment and help staff members decide what will best help them feel safe at work.



Ways to Support Your Staff . . .

- ◆ Recognize that staff are some of the most important people in children's lives.
- ◆ Give staff information on the effects of experiencing tragedy on children's development.
- ◆ Create a list of local resources for staff who need help coping with stresses.
- ◆ Model for staff how to listen and respond to children who seem to be out of control.
- ◆ Help staff feel less isolated by creating opportunities for them to get together to talk about their concerns.
- ◆ Become familiar with outside mental health resources to suggest in the event that a child or his/her family needs more help.
- ◆ Help staff see the power of their relationships with the children in their care and the importance of maintaining the program as a safe haven for children.

