

In the Aftermath of Tragedy

Checklist for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers

Watch For And Attend To:

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Feelings of fear, anger or hopelessness
- Withdrawal
- Agitation

Be Supportive By:

- Listening
- Sharing your own feelings in an honest and “real” way
- Helping children and youths find realistic ways to feel safer
- Supporting children and youths in expressing their anger, fear and vulnerability in safe ways
- Walking with children who are agitated or anxious
- Offer small, facilitated discussion groups where young people can talk about their feelings of anger and fear
- Provide an adult partner to walk with a child who cannot sit in a discussion group
- Identify an adult partner for each child to go to anytime they feel the need to walk, talk and be heard
- Provide nurturing “safe places” for children to retreat to when they are anxious. Fill it with books, puzzles or quiet music
- Post important resource phone numbers for children and youths in well-traveled areas near telephones

For more information, call G.E.A.R. Parent Network, the Crisis Line or the Federation of Families.

Online Resources

American School Counselor Association
schoolcounselor.org

Child Mind Institute
childmind.org

G.E.A.R. Parent Network
gearparentnetwork.org

Help for Depression
helpfordepression.com

Federation of Families
ffcmh.org

Tragic events are difficult even for adults to understand. We struggle to find meaning to events that seem to defy logic and challenge our basic assumptions. For developing children, the aftershocks of tragic events may linger for days, weeks, months or even years. They may, in fact, alter the course of their lives.



1.888.322.2136
www.kbhmaine.org
STATEWIDE CRISIS NUMBER:
1.888.568.1112

Shattered, But Not Broken



**Talking with your child
about public tragedies**



1.800.264.9224
www.gearparentnetwork.org

It may seem easy to protect children from being exposed to a crisis, but they live in the same world we do. They hear the same news stories, see the same images of disaster online and experience the same cultural events.

It's important that our children learn how to deal with tragic events and perhaps even more important for their parents, caretakers and loved ones to understand how to help them cope. The following suggestions are intended to help you navigate this difficult process.

During the Crisis

Remain calm: Remember that your children take their cues from you. If you appear fearful or out of control, they will be, too. You establish order and stability in their lives by letting them know that no matter what happens, they will be loved and cared for, even in the world appears random and unpredictable.

Discuss the event, but don't linger on details: You need to be honest with your child, but this doesn't mean you have to go into details. A striking image is sometimes more difficult to assimilate than a broad description of an unfortunate event.

Establish order: Sometimes in the midst of a tragedy, it appears that no one is in charge. Children especially might interpret television images as an indication that the established order has fallen. Let your child know that what may appear chaotic—first responders battling a fire or ambulances arriving on scene, for example—are actually signs that the world is getting back to normal.

Care for yourself: Although it's natural to want to care for loved ones, be sure to take time for yourself as well. Watch for signs of

burnout, including: obsession with details of the recent tragedy; lack of decision-making or objectivity; and difficulty eating, drinking or finding pleasure in the world.

Limit media exposure: We often forget the TV or radio is running in the background as we drop children off at school or daycare. Be aware of the time your child is spending watching TV or listening to the radio, especially during a crisis when the conversation may be frank or sensationalized.

Let your child know he or she has your full attention: You may need time to process events yourself, or forget that your child is relying on you to provide valuable information, but it's important to make time to explain the situation, answer questions and comfort your child.

Take time to comfort, cuddle and care for your children: Not all children will show outward signs of being scared, anxious or overwhelmed, so don't wait until your child asks for affection. Communication isn't always verbal, and often a hug will be as effective as a discussion.

After the Crisis

Give them time: The grieving process is different for everyone, but often children will become absent-minded or distracted after they have experienced a crisis. They may have trouble eating, sleeping or returning to everyday routines. Allow them time to heal, but also consider professional counseling if their behavior persists or seems severe.

Watch for changes in behavior: More profound changes in behavior might indicate growing problems. Children may exhibit a range of changes, including withdrawal, social regression, irritability and increased risk taking.

Create sensible plans for dealing with future crisis events: Making a plan not only tells your child that you are safeguarding him or her against future events, but also lets him or her know that preparation often reduces the damage disasters cause.

Stick to routines: Your family's routine is reassuring to your child because it is a sign that life goes on after a crisis. It's important to reinforce the idea that life is predictable and your child is safe.

Help others: Helping others in need will allow your child to feel less helpless in the face of tragedy. Everyone can contribute something.

Re-Establishing Order

When discussing tragedies with your child, keep in mind the importance of re-establishing order in his or her life. Here are some suggested themes to keep in mind as you discuss events with your child:

Public spaces are safe: Often a traumatic experience tells the child the he or she is not safe. A crisis such as a public shooting or fire violates the fundamental assurance from our society that our public spaces are safe. Let the child know that professionals work daily to ensure our safety, and institutions like schools have established safety procedures.

Violence is the exception, not the rule: Let your child know that violence isn't ordinary. Even adults have a difficult time dealing with the senselessness of a tragedy. Although you can't guarantee your child that another crisis won't arise, you should let him or her know that a crisis is an interruption to ordinary life. Life will return to normal.