

## After a Crisis: Helping Children Heal

Young children, toddlers, and preschoolers—even babies—know when bad things happen, and they remember what they have been through. After a scary event, we often see changes in their behavior. They may cry more, become clingy and not want us to leave, have temper tantrums, hit others, have problems sleeping, become afraid of things that didn't bother them before, lose skills. . . Changes like these are a sign that they need help. Here are some ways you can help them.

**S**afety – Focus on safety first. Your young child feels safe when you . . .

- Hold him or let him stay close to you.
- Tell her you will take care of her when things are scary or difficult. With children who are learning to talk, use simple words, like saying “I’m here.”
- Keep him away from frightening TV images and scary conversations.
- Do familiar things, like singing a song she likes or telling/reading a story.
- Let him know what will happen next (to the degree that you know).
- Have a predictable routine, at least for bedtime: a story, a prayer, cuddle time.
- Tell her where you are going and when you will come back.

**A**llow expression of feelings

- Young children often “behave badly” when they are worried or scared. Children can “act out” as a way of asking for help. Remember! Difficult feelings=Difficult behavior.
- Help the child name how she feels: “scared,” “happy,” “angry,” “sad.” Tell her it’s OK to feel that way.
- Show the child the right way to behave, like saying “It’s OK to be angry but it’s not OK to hit me.”
- Help him or her express anger in ways that won’t hurt, using words, play, or drawings.
- Talk about the things that are going well to help you and the child feel good.

**F**ollow the child’s lead

- Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need to be held.
- Listen to the child and watch his behavior to figure out what he needs.

**E**nable the child to tell the story of what happened during and after getting here.

- Having a story helps the child make sense of what happened and cope better with it.
- Children use play to tell their story. For example, they may separate toy animals to show how they are separated from their families.
- As you tell the story, follow the child’s lead. When the story is difficult, he may need breaks: running around, being held, playing something else. This is OK. He will come back to the story when he is ready.
- It can be hard to watch children’s play or listen to their stories. Get support if it is too hard for you to listen without becoming upset.

**T**ies – Connect with supportive people, community, culture, and rituals

- Simple things like a familiar bedtime story, a song, a prayer, or family traditions remind the child of their way of life and offer hope.
- If they belong to a group, like a church/religion, try to find ways to connect them.
- You can help the child best when you take care of yourself. Get support from others when you need it.

**Y**our Child Needs You! This is the most important thing to remember.

- Reassure him or her that you are there for them.
- It is common for children to be clingy and worried about being away from you.
- If you need to leave the child, let her know for how long and when you are coming back. If possible, leave something that belongs to you, or a picture that they can have.
- Just being with the child, even when you can’t fix things, helps them.