

HELPFUL TIPS FOR CHILDREN OF ANY AGE

- **Make your child feel safe.** All children, from toddlers to teens, will benefit from your touch—extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. It gives them a feeling of security, which is so important in the aftermath of a frightening or disturbing event. For specific information on what to do and say, see the age-by-age-guide.
- **Act calm.** Children look to adults for reassurance after traumatic events have occurred. Do not discuss your anxieties with your children, or when they are around, and be aware of the tone of your voice, as children quickly pick up on anxiety.
- **Maintain routines as much as possible.** Amidst chaos and change, routines reassure children that life will be OK again. Try to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or temporarily relocated, establish new routines. And stick with the same family rules, such as ones about good behavior.
- **Help children enjoy themselves.** Encourage kids to do activities and play with others. The distraction is good for them, and gives them a sense of normalcy.
- **Prevent or limit exposure to news coverage.** This is especially critical with toddlers and school-age children, as seeing disturbing events recounted on TV or in the newspaper or listening to them on the radio can give them a distorted understanding that may be even scarier than the truth. Children who believe bad events are temporary can more quickly recover from them.
- **Understand that children cope in different ways.** Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Let your child know it is normal to experience anger, guilt and sadness, and to express things in different ways—for example, a person may feel sad but not cry.
- **Pick good times to talk.** Look for natural openings to have a discussion, like when you observe a child at play reenacting the recent events.
- **Listen well.** It is important to understand how your child views the situation, and what is confusing or troubling to him or her. Do not lecture—just be understanding. Let them know it is OK to tell you how they are feeling at any time.
- **Acknowledge what your child is feeling.** If a child admits to a concern, do not respond “Oh, don’t be worried,” because he may feel embarrassed or criticized. Simply confirm what you are hearing: “Yes, I can see that you are worried.”
- **Know that it’s OK to answer, “I don’t know.”** What children need most is someone whom they trust to listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don’t worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say—after all, there is no answer that will make everything OK.

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- **Realize the questions may persist.** Because the aftermath of a disaster may include constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Let them know you are ready to talk at any time.
 - **Encourage family discussions about the death of a loved one.** When families can talk and feel sad together, it's more likely that kids will share their feelings.
 - **Do not give children too much responsibility.** It is very important not to overburden your child with tasks, or give them adult ones, as this can be too stressful for them. Instead, for the near future you should lower expectations for household duties and school demands, although it is good to have them do at least some chores.
 - **Give special help to kids with special needs.** These children may require more time, support, guidance and nurturance than other children. You might need to simplify the language you use, and repeat things very often. You may also need to tailor information to your child's strength; for instance, a child with language disability may better understand information through the use of visual materials or other means of communication you are used to.
 - **Help children relax with breathing exercises.** Breathing becomes shallow when anxiety sets in; deep, belly breaths can help children calm down. You can hold a feather or a wad of cotton in front of your child's mouth and ask him to blow at it, exhaling slowly. Or you can say, "Let's breathe in slowly while I count to three, then breathe out while I count to three." Place a stuffed animal or pillow on your child's belly as he lies down and ask him to breathe in and out slowly and watch the stuffed animal or pillow rise and fall.
 - **Watch for signs of trauma.** Within the first month after a disaster it is common to see kids spacing out and not responsive to your requests. After that, the numbness wears off and kids might experience more symptoms—especially children who have witnessed injuries or death, lost immediate family members, experienced previous trauma in their lives and who are not resettled in a new home. Signs of trauma: Constantly replaying the event in their minds; nightmares; irritability, anger and moodiness; poor concentration; appetite or sleep issues; behavior problems; nervousness about people getting too close; jumpiness from loud noises; regression to earlier behavior in young children, such as clinging, bed-wetting or thumb-sucking; difficulty sleeping or concentrating; detachment or withdrawal from others, use of alcohol or drugs in teens.

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- **Know when to seek help.** Although anxiety and other issues may last for months, if they do not abate or any of the following occur, seek immediate help from your family doctor or from a mental-health professional (contact the Red Cross). Get help if: your child starts to hear voices, sees things that are not there, becomes paranoid, experiences panic attacks or has thoughts of wanting to harm himself or other people.
 - **Try to stay together with your child.** This is usually best for a child's mental health. However, under these extreme circumstances, if separation is necessary, wherever children will have their basic needs met, feel safe and have good caregivers—ideally with individuals they love and trust—is the best place for them to be.
 - **Take care of yourself.** You can best help your child when you help yourself. Talk about concerns with friends and relatives; it might be helpful to form a support group. If you belong to a church or community group, keep participating. Try to eat right and get enough sleep. To reduce stress, do deep breathing. If you suffer from severe anxiety that interferes with your ability to function, seek help from a doctor or mental-health professional and if you don't have access to one, talk with a pastor or priest. While it is typical for people in this country to say that things are OK even when they are very bad, you must recognize your need for help and get it. Do it for your child's sake, if for no other reason.