



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

RESTORING A SENSE OF WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

Children are often exposed both directly and indirectly to the effects of disasters. While some will live in close proximity to an area or community directly impacted by disaster, many others will learn about it through the media or from their parents or friends.

It is important for parents, caregivers, and professionals to answer children's questions and reassure them about their safety.

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Communicate effectively with your children.

- Keep your statements simple, factual, clear and sensitively worded.
- Do not overwhelm children with too much information.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you ask them what they have heard and what they have questions about.
- Children will get information from other children, adults and the media. Make sure your children do not misunderstand this information by asking them what they have heard.

If children are anxious or fearful, let them know that you understand and will help them with their feelings.

- Children's distress may be based on a different event. Inquire what their distress is about.
- Distress in such situations is usually transient. If children's distress persists, seek help from a trusted provider such as their pediatrician.
- Some children may react by acting out or becoming very quiet. Talk to your child about what is troubling them. Avoid reprimanding or punishing them for their reactions. Let them know that talking may help.

A common question is "Why do these things happen?" Here are some possible responses.

- We usually cannot be sure what led a specific individual to act in such a way.
- Such events can result from many causes including mental

illness, rage, extreme political or religious beliefs, and hatred.

- Avoid stigmatizing people within the same or similar demographic as an alleged offender.
- Help children understand that government authorities work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they happen.

You can increase your child's sense of safety by:

- Knowing where they are and return time.
- Clear communication method in normal (e.g. cell phone) and emergency situations (e.g. designated meeting place if phone doesn't work).
- Keeping them away from places or situations that are likely to put them in danger.
- Being aware of community changes about risks that might surface.

How do you plan for an emergency?

- Discuss possible emergency situations with your children and plans for responding.
- Talk calmly with them about what they can do if they feel they are in danger.
- Instruct them to trust and seek help from police and other authorities.
- Tell your children to say something to an adult when they see something suspicious.

Online Resources

If you have any questions about your child's health or response to a traumatic event talk to your primary care or behavioral care provider or review additional resources at the following sites:

- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress www.cstsonline.org
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network www.ncstn.org
- American Red Cross — www.redcross.org

