

Helping Children Cope in Difficult Times

Like adults, children may not know what to think, how to feel, or how to act when they experience difficult times in their lives. Events that might be confusing, scary, or sad for adults may be even more confusing, scary, or sad for children. Children may have trouble understanding and coping with:

- Natural disasters (like tornados, fires, and floods)
- Human-made disasters (like the OKC bombing and war)
- Severe accidents or illnesses
- The death of a friend or family member
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Exposure to fighting at home, at school, or in the community
- Or any major change in the family's living situation (like moving to a new home or changes in who lives in the home)

Children often develop emotional and physical reactions when faced with difficult times. For most children, these reactions are normal responses to an unusual experience. Sometimes, parents may notice that their children react quickly after a difficult experience. Other times, children may not start to show reactions for up to days or weeks later.

While some children may only experience a few worries and bad memories that quickly go away, other children may develop long-lasting reactions. Some children may continue to react as if the event just happened, even if it happened weeks or months ago.

Parents should watch for these reactions in children exposed to difficult events:

- Frequent memories and/or nightmares of the event
- Getting easily upset when reminded of the event
- Avoiding activities, places, or people associated with the event
- Often "zoning out", spending time alone, and/or having trouble remembering parts of the event
- Trouble getting to sleep and/or staying asleep
- Frequently cranky, upset, and/or nervous
- Trouble concentrating
- Easily startled or jumpy

A parent whose child is having reactions up to 1 month after the event occurred may want to have their child seen by a counselor or psychologist. The counselor or psychologist can determine if treatment might help reduce the child's stress reactions.

How Children React in Difficult Times

Children's common **physical reactions** to difficult experiences include:

- Trouble getting to sleep and/or staying asleep or sleeping more than usual
- Feeling nervous, jumpy, or restless
- Headaches or stomachaches
- Reduced or increased appetite
- Easily startled or upset by loud sounds (like sirens, backfires, or thunder)

Children may also show **emotional and behavioral changes**:

- Reduced attention span and/or trouble focusing
- Less interest in activities that the child used to enjoy (like not wanting to play sports)
- Spending more time alone and wanting to be away from friends and/or family
- Avoiding people, places, or things that may remind the child of the experience (like not wanting to see Dad or not wanting to return to the family home)
- Nightmares
- Angry tantrums
- Aggressive or defiant behavior
- Increased sadness and/or tearfulness
- Changes in school performance (like lower grades, reduced class participation, "daydreaming" or "zoning out" during class activities, and acting out)

Children may respond differently to difficult experiences. Factors that affect a child's response may include:

- **Personal Characteristics**
 - ✓ Age
 - ✓ Developmental level
 - ✓ Personal beliefs about the experience
- **Characteristics of the Experience**
 - ✓ Severity of the experience
 - ✓ Number of difficult experiences the child has had to handle
- **Environmental Factors**
 - ✓ The strength of family and peer relationships
 - ✓ The safety and structure of the child's current home
 - ✓ The family's access to community resources (like counseling and support groups)
 - ✓ The support provided by their mother or other caregivers

General Guidelines for Parent Support

- **Remember to find support for yourself.**
 - ✓ The best predictor of a child’s ability to cope well is having a parent who is coping well.
- **Allow your child time to cope with the difficult experience.**
 - ✓ Expect that your child may temporarily show a decline in behavior and school performance.
 - ✓ Tolerate your child’s retelling and playing out of the difficult experience.
 - ✓ Set limits on scary or hurtful play or talk. This form of play or talk may further upset your child.
- **Use simple words to describe what happened and what will happen.**
 - ✓ Children may blame themselves for the event.
 - ✓ They may have fears about what will happen next.
 - ✓ Listen for fear or personal blaming and discuss it with your child as soon as it occurs.
- **Encourage your child to talk about confusing feelings, worries, and reactions.**
 - ✓ Let your child know that you understand your child’s feelings (For example: “You sound angry that we had to leave our home. You’re right – it is really tough having to leave and move somewhere new.”).
 - ✓ Let your child know that these are normal reactions for a child to have after something like this (For example: “Many children have nightmares after going through scary experiences. Nightmares come from the fears we have inside - they aren’t real. Nightmares will happen less and less over time.”).
 - ✓ Expect that your child may ask questions that may be shocking to you. Try to answer these questions calmly and in simple terms.
 - ✓ If you become too distressed when listening to your child, find another caring adult who can listen to your child. Part of taking care of yourself is knowing your emotional limits and giving yourself a break when needed.
- **Reinforce ideas of safety and security.**
 - ✓ Explain to your child what you and others are doing to make sure that you and your child are safe.
 - ✓ Finish any talk about the event with a focus on your child’s safety and then engage in a calming activity with your child.
 - ✓ Examples of calming activities include taking deep breaths, working together on an art project, holding hands and singing a quiet song, or reading a favorite story.
 - ✓ Provide extra nighttime comforts when possible (like nightlights and stuffed animals).
- **Maintain a consistent structure for your child.**
 - ✓ Establish and follow a schedule for your child’s daily activities (like having a regular time for meals and bedtime).
 - ✓ Continue to enforce behavior rules - praise good behaviors, ignore minor misbehaviors, and use non-physical discipline (like time-outs) for more severe misbehaviors.

Stress Reactions in Children 5 Years of Age and Younger

Unique Reactions:

In addition to the common child physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions listed on page 2, reactions seen in children 5 years of age and younger may include:

- Fear of being separated from the parent
- Crying, whimpering, screaming
- Talking repeatedly about the difficult experience
- Recreating the difficult situation when playing or coloring
- Trembling
- Clinging to the parent
- Returning to behaviors shown at earlier ages (like thumb-sucking, bedwetting, baby talk, tantrums, and fear of darkness)

Guidelines:

In addition to the general guidelines for parent support provided on page 3, consider these guidelines for children 5 years of age and younger:

- If your child is fearful, try to limit separations between you and the child. Prepare your child for times when you do have to be apart. Have your child stay with a known and trusted adult.
- Let your child feel some control by making choices about daily activities (like what to wear, what to play, and what to eat).
- Expect some emotional outbursts from your child. When you see your child becoming upset, help your child calm down.
- Three ways to help your child calm down:
 - ✓ Practice “Bubble Breaths”
 - Breathe in for a count of 5
 - Hold your breath for 5 counts
 - Exhale slowly for 5 counts while blowing bubbles from a bubble wand (real or pretend)
 - Repeat 2 times
 - ✓ Practice Relaxation Skills – See the SAFETY First children’s booklet for activities.
 - “Squeeze the Lemon”, “Stretch like a Cat”, “Shoo Fly”, “Baby Elephant”, and “Playing on the Beach”
 - ✓ Practice “Rag Dolls and Robots”
 - Pretend your body is as stiff and straight as a robot for a count of 5
 - Then pretend that your body is as limp and loose as a rag doll for a count of 5
 - Repeat 2 times

Stress Reactions in Children Ages 6 to 12

Unique Reactions:

In addition to the common child physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions listed on page 2, reactions seen in children 6 to 12 years of age may include:

- Fear of being separated from the parent
- Refusal to attend school
- Recreating the difficult experience when playing or coloring
- Extreme withdrawal and/or showing little emotion
- Physical complaints (like stomachaches and headaches)
- Feelings of guilt; Believing that the event was their fault
- Fighting and outbursts at school
- Returning to behaviors exhibited at earlier ages (like thumb-sucking, bedwetting, baby talk, tantrums, wanting to sleep with parents at night, and fear of darkness)

Guidelines:

In addition to the general guidelines for parent support provided on page 3, consider these guidelines for children 6 to 12 years of age:

- If your child is fearful, try to limit separations between you and the child. Prepare your child for times when you do have to be apart. Have your child stay with a known and trusted adult.
- Let your child feel some control by making choices on daily activities (like what to wear, what to play, and what to eat).
- Expect some emotional outbursts from your child. When you see your child becoming upset, help your child calm down.
- Three ways to help your child calm down:
 - ✓ Practice “Bubble Breaths”
 - Breathe in for a count of 5
 - Hold your breath for 5 counts
 - Exhale slowly for 5 counts while blowing bubbles from a bubble wand (real or pretend)
 - Repeat 2 times
 - ✓ Practice Relaxation Skills – See the SAFETY First children’s booklet for activities.
 - “Squeeze the Lemon”, “Stretch like a Cat”, “Shoo Fly”, “Baby Elephant”, and “Playing on the Beach”
 - ✓ Practice “Rag Dolls and Robots”
 - Pretend your body is as stiff and straight as a robot for a count of 5
 - Then pretend that your body is as limp and loose as a rag doll for a count of 5
 - Repeat 2 times

Stress Reactions in Adolescents Ages 13 to 17

Unique Reactions:

Adolescents may show many of the reactions seen in adults. In addition to the common child physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions listed on page 2, reactions seen in adolescents may include:

- Increased physical complaints (like stomachaches and headaches)
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Depression and/or anxiety
- Anger and hostility toward others
- Increase in risk taking behaviors (including skipping school, alcohol and substance abuse)
- Decline in school performance and/or missing school
- Feeling guilty about being unable to stop the difficult event and protect others

Guidelines:

In addition to the general guidelines for parent support provided on page 3, consider these guidelines for adolescents:

- Let your teen talk to and/or spend time with supportive friends.
- Let your teen know that strong feelings like guilt, shame, embarrassment, or anger are normal following difficult experiences. Assure your teen that the event is not your teen's fault.
- Set limits that reduce your teen's ability to engage in risk-taking behaviors. Talk with your teen about his/her distress.
- Maintain your teen's routine at school. Work with your teen's school counselor, teachers, or principal to provide your teen with support during school hours.
- Ways to help your teen cope with difficult feelings:
 - ✓ Encourage your teen to relax by reading books, listening to music, writing thoughts or feelings in a journal, drawing, or taking a walk.
 - ✓ Practice Deep Breathing
 - Deeply breathe in for 5 seconds. Hold your breath for 5 seconds. Exhale slowly for 5 seconds. Repeat twice.
 - To increase your relaxation level, you can pair deep breathing with a soothing image like ocean waves rolling in and out of the beach.
 - ✓ Practice Muscle Relaxation
 - Starting with your hands, tense each hand separately for 5 seconds and then relax the muscles for 5 seconds. Go through your hands, arms, shoulders, neck, face, chest, back, stomach, legs, and feet. Tense and relax each body part twice.
 - Then tense and relax your entire body twice. Finish with deep breathing.