



# Helping Children and Teens Cope After a Traumatic Event



*Next Generation is an Urban Alliance initiative. [www.urbanalliance.com](http://www.urbanalliance.com)*

**Sadly, we live in a broken world and children and teens witness traumatic and painful events nearly every day.** Sometimes, events like mass shootings or natural disasters may be seen from a distance through social media or on the news. Other times, a death of a loved one or exposure to violence may hit closer to

home. However, adults have the unique opportunity to help children and youth emotionally and spiritually process these events when they occur. The way supportive adults respond can help calm fears, create a supportive environment, instill hope and foster healing.

## General Guidelines for Offering Support



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*The impact of a traumatic event on a child or teen will depend on a variety of factors, including their proximity to the event, the degree to which they experienced fear or loss, previous traumatic experiences, and the responses of important adults in their lives. The following tips can be used to support children and teens who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event:*

✓ **Accept emotions as they are.** Children and teens need space to feel whatever they are feeling without judgement. Because everyone processes emotions and experiences differently, it is important to allow space for various reactions and give each child or teen the opportunity to express whatever it is they are thinking or feeling.

✓ **Make time to talk.** Ask questions to encourage open discussion and provide opportunities to ask questions. By engaging a child or teen in discussion, supportive adults can better understand what they are thinking and how best to support them. It is important for adults to listen more than they talk, and carefully monitor their own reactions. Adults should reserve their own raw emotional reactions for conversations with other adults who can offer support.

✓ **Reaffirm safety.** Oftentimes experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event challenges a child or teenagers core sense of safety. It is important to emphasize to the child or teen that they are safe and use the opportunity to brainstorm the things they can do to remain safe. Reassure them that there are many people such as police officers and firefighters who work to protect the community and that there are policies and procedures at schools, churches and other public places to keep them safe. It is also an opportunity to remind them that God is always with them and always cares.



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- ✓ **Give some space, but stay connected.** Sometimes, children and teens need space and other times, they may want to talk. It is important to read their cues to decide what is best in each situation. If a child or teen is struggling to communicate, do not continue asking questions. For some, it is easier to express themselves while engaging in an activity or share their feelings non-verbally through drawing, painting or writing.
- ✓ **Encourage a normal routine.** Parents and teachers can do their best to help a child or teen maintain a regular routine after a traumatic event. This can be reassuring and promote physical and emotional health.
- ✓ **Be careful with “Christian-ese”.** Well-meaning Christians may offer answers in the form of Bible verses, prayers and the suggestion to attend church. Phrases such as, “You just need to trust God”, “Pray about it and you will feel better”, “God is in control”, “It was God’s will”, “At least...”, or “He’s in a better place now” are generally not helpful when a person is grieving or struggling. Children and teens may hear such statements as discounting their emotions. Of course, if a child or teen asks for prayer or Scripture, feel free offer spiritual support.
- ✓ **Protect from media overload.** Turn off the television and put down your cell phone. It is important to protect children and teens from media overload. The younger the child, the more damaging the exposure to graphic images will be.
- ✓ **Affirm that you care about them.** Parents can tell their children that they love them. Other supportive adults can affirm that they care and want to be there.
- ✓ **Have fun together.** It is important to do things that foster positive emotions. While children and teens need space to share difficult emotions, they also need the breaks that fun activities provide.
- ✓ **God offers hope and comfort.** God is the source of all comfort, healing and hope. Encourage children and teens to honestly share their thoughts and feelings with God and ask Him for help. Remind them that God cares for them, is always with them and has a good plan for their future. Older children and teens may question why a good God would let bad things happen. This is an opportunity for adults to help older children and teens begin to explore these tough questions.

## Child Development and Trauma

At different stages of development, children and teens react to trauma differently and need different types of support. It is important to match your questions and responses to each child or teen's age and maturity level:

### Pre-School Age



Children ages 3-5 will be most affected by traumatic events that impact their day-to-day lives (either directly or because an event impacts a caregiver). Often, they will not fully understand the event, but will see the way it impacts their routine and the emotions of the adults around them. Young children may regress and resume behaviors such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, or may become fearful, clingy, withdrawn, throw tantrums or act out the scary event through play.

When talking to a young child, get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using words they can understand. It is important to assure young children that they are safe, avoid unnecessary separations, maintain routines, and offer extra assurance through physical affection, words and extra quality time. It is important to limit the information young children receive about traumatic events and affirm their safety.

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### Elementary Age



Children ages 6-12 will be impacted similarly to younger children. They may regress, become more fearful, isolate from friends, disengage from previously enjoyable activities, or struggle in school. They may also act out more, become hyperactive, feel responsible for the event, or complain about physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches. They may act out the event during play or retell the story over and over. At this age, children have a greater understanding of the world and know that bad things sometimes happen.

It is important to answer questions and help children separate fantasy from reality so they have a realistic understanding of the event. Adults can provide opportunities for children to experience control and make choices in daily activities. While they need accurate information, it is important to consider which pieces of information will help them process the event and which will overwhelm them. Similar to young children, elementary-aged children may need extra reassurance, affection, and quality time with supportive adults.

## Middle- and High-School Age



Teens react to trauma in similar ways that adults do and will have a greater understanding of the traumatic event than children. Adolescence is a time when teens are already experiencing a number of life changes, so it may be even more difficult for them to cope. After a trauma, the world may suddenly seem like a dangerous place. Teens may feel intense and overwhelming emotions, have trouble sleeping and experience physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches, have difficulty concentrating at school, and may act out more often or isolate themselves from peers. Older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine “I’m OK” or even with silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Sometimes, teens become more argumentative or engage in risky behaviors, such as drugs or alcohol, to cope.

It is important for supportive adults to be available to talk when a teen is ready to do so. It is helpful to ask a teen what they think has happened and what other kids at school are saying. If they know upsetting information that is true, don’t deny it. Help them to have a realistic understanding of what happened, and gently correct any incorrect information. Often, teens want to talk about the event as well as explore existential questions related to God, danger, pain and suffering. Teens also benefit from engaging in fun and recreational activities with supportive adults and peers.

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### Professional Help

The more directly a child or teen has been impacted, the greater the need for intervention. The number of protective factors (e.g. support) versus risk factors (e.g. lack of support) can also have an impact. If after two or three months a child and teen still seems overwhelmed by the event or is exhibiting a number of the symptoms described above, consider getting help from a professional counselor. Look for a counselor with experience working with children and teens and who has training in helping people who have witnessed or experienced trauma.

