

## **HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES**

Traumatic events “happen.” They may be large events that impact the whole country or the whole civilized world; or they may be events that affect an individual, a family, a neighborhood, or a community. Regardless of their scope, these events can have a powerful impact on anyone caught in their repercussions. As an analogy, one can experience the same effect standing next to a small explosion as they would standing further away from a large one.

As we all try to deal with and comprehend the uncertainties of current events, we must also keep in mind the impact they are having on our children and help them learn to deal with them as well. Young people often do not have enough life experience to keep things in perspective and, because of this, fear can become overwhelming. The following are some common reactions you may see in children who are experiencing trauma. Reactions will vary with the age and developmental stage of the child or adolescent. Generally, older youth will have a need to talk about it and to be reminded of the skills they have to deal with a trauma. Younger children will need more reassurance that things are okay and to know to whom they should go for help.

The following are some developmental reactions and responses compiled by the Prevention and Community Response Unit of the Washtenaw Youth Public Health Department that parents and other adults could use to help their children come to terms with their feelings and emotions during a difficult time.

### **Common Reactions & Appropriate Responses from Adults**

#### **AGE: 6 – 10**

##### **Reaction**

- Impaired concentration and learning difficulties affecting performance at school
- Radical change in behavior, e.g., quiet child becomes active; active child, lethargic
- Somatic complaints, such as headaches
- Retelling the event with great detail and “savior” endings
- Preoccupation with their behavior during or leading up to the event with feelings of guilt and responsibility
- Specific fears triggered by reminders or while alone
- Fear of being overwhelmed by their own feelings
- Increased difficulty controlling their own behavior and feeling frightened by this lack of control

##### **Response**

- Allow enough “free” supervised time for play or expression through art, music, or dance
- Encourage your child to let you or the teacher know that they may be having a hard time concentrating while at school
- Try to be patient with any behavior changes
- Reassure the child that s/he will be safe and there are people around to help
- Help your child associate emotional and physical sensations s/he may have had during the event and suggest ways of helping her/him feel better; e.g., changing the subject, doing something else
- As with play, allow time to talk; acknowledge the normalcy of the reaction, what secret images s/he may have, and what specific reminders s/he may have

- The supportive presence of adults will help the child not to be so overwhelmed, and help remind her/him that feelings lead to actions s/he may not like or cannot control. Help her/him to establish a sense of control by doing something proactive, such as organizing a collection drive, making cards to send to those in need, or making red, white and blue ribbons for friends and classmates to wear.

### **AGE 2 – 6**

- Generalized fear
- Cognitive confusion, e.g., not understanding that the danger is over
- Helplessness, passivity, e.g. may become mute, withdrawn, and still
- Anxious attachment to caregiver, e.g., clinging, not wanting to be away from caregiver, not wanting to sleep alone
- Sleep disturbances; night terrors
- Regressive reactions, e.g., toileting, dressing, speech
- Engaging in reenactments and play about the event; sometimes with magical qualities/character of the event
- Incomplete understanding of death; e.g., permanency of death, association with sleep, a desire to “fix up” the deceased
- Difficulty identifying and expressing what is wrong; e.g., periodic sadness

### **Response**

- Need rapid reassurance that they will be okay and taken care of
- Reestablish familiar adult protection
- Give repeated concrete clarification of what has happened and anticipate their concerns
- Provide support, rest, comfort, food, and opportunities to play
- Provide consistent care taking; e.g., assurance of being picked up at school, keeping a regular meal schedule, bedtime and when caregivers will be home
- Be as tolerant as possible with regressive behavior; it is temporary
- Try to remove the association of what happened with specific trigger/reminders; e.g., playgrounds, cars
- Explain the reality of death in age appropriate terms, when the child is open; e.g. a private moment, or while reading

### **For all ages:**

- Give reassurances and hugs
- Assure them they and their families are safe (if this is the case)
- Limit their exposure to graphic details
- Let them talk and reassure them and solicit their ideas and feelings

Compiled by Michael B. Murphy

## **CLASSROOM DISCUSSION SHEET**

### **Facts to share about the incident**

(Describe the basic facts of the incident without making editorial comments or assumptions)

Some potential questions and answers:

- (Anticipate the questions that may come up about the incident. Think about these from a parents viewpoint and staff viewpoint. Develop answers to these questions)

The following considerations for leading class discussions are common sense, but may provide encouragement to go ahead and do what you already know how to do.

**Walk through the process** – This means anticipating changes following an incident, what to expect, and what to do. It applies to practical issues (e.g., “Yes, there will be school tomorrow.”); emotional issues (e.g., “Some of you may be feeling sad; that is okay and it is a natural response to a time like this.”); and anything else the students may expect.

### **General Considerations for Leading Post-Crisis Discussions**

- Find a comfortable place
- Maintain calm
- Be honest with yourself
- Read between the lines
- Validate feelings
- Listen well
- Show belief
- Dispel fault
- Explore fears
- Provide factual information
- Explore resources
- Find friends
- Stress your availability