

How to Support Children and Teens Through Loss and Trauma

The Coronavirus outbreak and school closures have caused significant disruption to the lives of children and their families. The stresses of self-quarantine and the threat of potential illness of close others may place children and adults at risk for experiencing traumatic events such as witnessing violence or abuse, or being separated from, or losing parents, family members or caregivers. These and other stressors may have long-term impacts on people's daily lives and ability to thrive.

Everyone experiences stress and trauma differently. Some children may show visible signs of stress and trauma, while others may not. Children with a prior history of trauma, anxiety and panic, those experiencing housing instability, food insecurity, an unstable family climate, discrimination or who have suffered loss of a family member may have a particularly difficult time coping with the significant daily disruption of the COVID-19 outbreak.

It is important to be prepared if children begin to show signs of traumatic stress.

Signs of traumatic stress often differ by age group. They include:

Preschool

- Show signs of fear
- Cling to parent or caregiver
- Cry, scream or whimper
- Have difficulty speaking
- Move aimlessly or become immobile
- Have changes in sleep and appetite
- Return to behaviors common to younger children (loss of bowel control, bed wetting)
- Become irritable, angry, or destructive

School Age (Ages 6-12)

- Lost interest in family, friends and fun activities
- Have sleep problems or nightmares
- Have changes in appetite
- Become irritable, angry or destructive
- Struggle with school or homework
- Have trouble with peer relationships
- Complain of physical problems

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- Develop new fears
- Feel excessively sad, guilty, hopeless or emotionally numb

Adolescents (Ages 13-18)

- Feel isolated, guilty or very sad.
- Act angry, irritable, disrespectful or destructive
- Have physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches
- Lose interest in hobbies, interest, and peers
- Have suicidal thoughts or engage in self-destructive behaviors
- Use or abuse alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or illegal drugs
- Have flashbacks, nightmares, or other sleep problems

Children with Special Needs

- Reactions will depend on the child's developmental level and their ability to communicate.
- Depending on a child's age, they may display symptoms or behaviors similar to same-aged peers.

A child's response to trauma and loss is greatly influenced by how the adults in their lives respond. Regardless of a child's age, it is important to offer ongoing and consistent understanding, reassurance and support. By educating yourself about traumatic stress and how to speak with children and teens about loss, you can help your child to effectively handle their emotions and eventually move toward healing.

Here are several important things that you can do

Manage your own stress: We are all affected by each other's stress. This is particularly true when we are required to stay at home for any length of time. Make sure to attend to your basic health needs such as maintaining a healthy diet, doing a bit of physical exercise each day, giving yourself permission to take time alone if possible, speaking with others about your feelings, balancing time focused on the media with things you enjoy, and asking for support when you need it. Accept that the emotions that you are feeling are natural during this difficult time.

Create safety, security and trust: We all need safety to heal from trauma and loss. For children this can mean:

- Minimizing stress in your household
- Creating routines and predictability
- Giving children and teens the opportunity to tell their stories, and being a good listener
- Limiting children's exposure to the media
- Keeping your promises
- Scheduling regular quality time with your child each day
- Modeling a healthy lifestyle (diet, exercise, stress management skills)

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- Empowering children to reduce the spread of germs by practicing good hygiene and social distancing
- Accepting that each person will experience trauma, grief and loss in a different way
- Remembering that grieving is a process not an event. It does not move according to a timeline, and may resurface when you least expect it.
- Telling the truth about the tragic event or loss a family member. Children are sensitive and bright, and will see through false or misleading information.
- Letting children know that you want to understand and support them.
- Being aware of your own need to grieve, and taking time to work through your emotions.

Support children in developmentally-appropriate ways

Regardless of age, safety, reassurance and validation are particularly important when supporting youths who are feeling the effects of trauma and loss. It is important to remind youths and adults that you are here for them, are doing everything possible to protect them. In addition, offer developmentally-appropriate physical soothing like hugs if desired, and calming objects such as blankets.

Preschool

- Patience and understanding
- Provide verbal and physical reassurance
- Reward positive behavior and validate feelings often
- Make space for children to ask questions and express their feelings
- Encourage expression through play, storytelling, and reenactment
- Plan soothing, calming activities before naps and bedtime
- Maintain regular routines
- Avoid media exposure
- Encourage time for creativity and expression
- Make dedicated time for play

School Age (Ages 6-12)

- Patience, understanding and reassurance
- Reward positive behavior and validate feelings often
- Encourage keeping in touch with friends
- Encourage healthy diet, and regular exercise and stretching
- Stick to existing routines
- Participate in household activities
- Set gentle but firm limits
- Encourage discussion of thoughts, feelings and experiences with friends and family.
- Follow children's need for information, and encourage them to ask questions.

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- Provide short, accurate answers
- Encourage time for creativity and expression
- Limit media exposure
- Address any stigma, misinformation or discrimination

Adolescents (Ages 13-18)

- Patience, understanding and reassurance
- Reward positive behavior and validate feelings often
- Encourage keeping in touch with friends
- Encourage healthy diet, and regular exercise, stretching and relaxation
- Stick to existing routines
- Participate in household activities and family routines
- Encourage discussion of thoughts, feelings and experiences with friends and family.
- Limit media exposure if possible, and discuss what they have heard from media, friends, and peers.
- Encourage time for creativity and expression
- Address any stigma, misinformation or discrimination

Children with Special Needs

- Provide increased access to comforting activities and sensory soothing needs
- Offer short, clear answers with factual information that match a child's developmental level and understanding
- Limit pre-occupation with getting ill by providing clear, appropriate information about what you and others are doing to keep the child safe, healthy and secure

Resources for Schools, Staff, Teachers and Practitioners

- National Association of School Psychologists - [Identifying Seriously Traumatized Children: Tips for Parents and Educators](#).
- Education Northwest: [A Practitioner's Guide to Educating Traumatized Children](#)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)

Resources for Parents

- Help Guide: [Helping Children Cope with Trauma](#)
- Sesame Street – [When Families Grieve: How to talk with children about the death of a family member](#)