

# TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT TRAGEDY

"How can I explain this crisis to my child when I can't even understand it myself?" If you are finding it hard to cope with a tragic situation, it can be difficult to know what to say to a child. But children may be confused and upset (especially if the adults around them are), and will need comfort and reassurance. The following points may help you tackle this challenging task.

- Like many of us, children typically worry about the safety of themselves and their loved ones. Let them know that steps are being taken to ensure everyone's safety.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings and concerns. It's okay if you're struggling with some of the same issues and don't have all the answers. However, it's not helpful to say "don't cry" or "there's no reason to be frightened."
- Give your children extra attention and affection. Try to maintain as much of their regular routine as possible.
- If your children are watching upsetting news on TV, be available to watch with them and discuss what they're seeing. Consider limiting TV time.
- Don't assume that your children understand what they see on TV. For example, children who see a disaster replayed several times may think they are watching several different events.
- Allow children to participate in relief efforts such as making a donation or sending a card to a bereaved family.
- Understand that children may ask the same questions or replay the same scenes over and over. Adults do the same thing, if only in their minds.
- In younger children (up to age 7 or so), there may be changes such as increased clinging, crying, or bedwetting. The more you accept these reactions and provide extra affection, the more quickly children will bounce back.
- School-aged children may use toys or pretend play to reenact a traumatic event, rather than talking about it. This is age-appropriate and healthy. Adults can join in and guide the play in a positive direction with imaginary police, fire, or rescue workers. You can also encourage your children to express their feelings through drawing or writing.
- Encourage teenagers to talk without pressuring them. They may find it easier to talk if you share your feelings first, or if they can talk while doing another activity (e.g., eating, riding in the car). Allow teens to listen to and participate in adult discussions, even if you disagree with their viewpoints.

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