

“Children and Trauma”

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This presentation was shared with staff at the Philadelphia Red Cross House. The Red Cross House provides transitional housing and recovery services for survivors of disaster.

It is not uncommon for children’s needs to be overlooked following a family disaster. Adults struggling to put their lives back together may not recognize that the children are also suffering.

Children’s wounds are often invisible. Without words to describe their pain, they tend to bury feelings of fear and helplessness. Behavior changes are clues that children are having trouble coping. Some child survivors become “clingy.” Others act out aggressively. Children sometimes adopt the “little parent” role tending to other family members. What all these children need is a trusted, caring adult to notice and to help them feel safe again.

Trauma is particularly harmful to young children. Young brains are highly sensitive to the damaging onslaught of stress chemicals. Even after the threat is over, their nervous systems remain in alarm mode. Recovery is more problematic for children who have been through previous traumas. Without intervention, traumatized children face long-term physical and psychological impairment.

Sometimes simple gestures are the most healing to a child suffering from traumatic stress. When bad things happen, good things to do are:

1. Be physically and emotionally available for your child. Show plenty of warm affection. Spend one-on-one time playing or just talking about whatever the child wants to bring up. Listen attentively. Accept all the feelings and let him/her know it is okay to be upset, sad, scared, angry, etc. Encourage younger children, who don’t yet have the necessary verbal skills, to express their feelings through art work, storytelling, movement and play.
2. Explain how the tragedy happened in simple terms. Remind your child that the difficult event is not likely to recur. Children need to know that the disaster was not their fault in any way. Reassure them that they are safe and are being well cared for.

3. Take a deep breath or two. Be as calm and patient as you can. Kids who are stressed often show their feelings by misbehaving. Show them your loving acceptance and sincere interest in understanding what they are trying to convey. Monitor your own response to the tragedy. Kids' reactions are strongly influenced by the adults' reactions to life's events.
4. Ensure normal routines as much as possible, i.e. the usual bedtimes, meal times, etc. Avoid making too many changes. Predictable structure is comforting. Organize social events with the kids' friends. Engage in enjoyable activities as a family. Laughter and play are especially healing for everybody. Play games or watch funny movies together. Read stories about triumph and hope.
5. Exercise is an effective way to discharge distress. Walking or running around outside releases stress from the body. Time in nature can bring peacefulness. Dispel tension so it doesn't lead to family arguments. Monitor exposure to bad-news media. Avoid the "hungry, angry, lonely, tired" triggers, which make people more easily provoked.
6. Help your child feel in control again. Let him/her choose family activities, meals, clothing, etc. Encourage him/her to help out and volunteer. It is empowering to feel like you're positively contributing to others' wellbeing.
7. Interventions centered on play are highly effective for traumatized children. Play is the work of children. It is the way they learn to cope with stressful experiences, express their thoughts and feelings, discover the world around them, build relationships and develop a sense of competence and confidence. Play therapy, especially in the form of exuberant play, is especially healing for a child's brain after suffering a trauma.

Nurturing playfulness in adults has the same benefits. A family that plays together heals together!