

# After A Disaster: How To Help Child Victims

Children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are three times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma as a teenager or later. But children are able to cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults support and help them with their experiences. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

It's important to remember that some children may never show distress because they don't feel upset, while others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months. Other children may not show a change in behavior, but may still need your help.

## Children may exhibit these behaviors after a disaster

1. Be upset over the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear or other items that adults might consider insignificant, but which are important to the child.
2. Change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive or change from being outgoing to shy and afraid.
3. Develop nighttime fears. They may be afraid to sleep alone at night, with the light off, to sleep in their own room, or have nightmares or bad dreams.
4. Be afraid the event will reoccur.
5. Become easily upset, crying and whining.
6. Lose trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
7. Revert to younger behavior such as bed wetting and thumb sucking.
8. Not want parents out of their sight and refuse to go to school or childcare.
9. Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of something they had said or done.
10. Become afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
11. Have symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.
12. Worry about where they and their family will live.

## Things Parents or Other Caring Adults Can Do

1. Talk with the children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment. Let them know they can have own feelings, which might be different than others. It's OK.
2. Let the children take their time to figure things out and to have their feelings. Don't rush them or pretend that they don't think or feel as they do.
3. Help them learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, mad and scared. Just be sure the words fit their feelings - not yours.
4. Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them. Reassure them many times.
5. Stay together as a family as much as possible.
6. Go back as soon as possible to former routines or develop new ones. Maintain a regular schedule for the children.
7. Reassure the children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
8. Let them have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
9. Help your children know that others love them and care about them by visiting, talking on the phone or writing to family members, friends and neighbors.
10. Encourage the children to give or send pictures they have drawn or things they have written.
11. Re-establish contact with extended family members
12. Help your children learn to trust adults again by keeping promises, including children in planning routines and outings.



**CONNECTICUT  
Clearinghouse**  
a program of the Connecticut Center  
for Prevention, Wellness and Recovery

**800.232.4424 (phone)**

**860.793.9813 (fax)**

**[www.ctclearinghouse.org](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org)**

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

13. Help your children regain faith in the future by helping them develop plans for activities that will take place later - next week, next month.
14. Children cope better when they are healthy, so be sure your children get needed healthcare as soon as possible.
15. Make sure the children are getting balanced meals and eating enough food and getting enough rest.
16. Remember to take care of yourself so you can take care of your children.
17. Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, rub their backs, listen to music, talk quietly about the day.
18. If you will be away for a time, tell them where you are going and make sure you return or call at the time you say you will.
19. Allow special privileges such as leaving the light on when they sleep for a period of time after the disaster.
20. Limit their exposure to additional trauma, including news reports.
21. Children should not be expected to be brave or tough, or to "not cry."
22. Don't be afraid to "spoil" children in this period after a disaster.
23. Don't give children more information than they can handle about the disaster.
24. Don't minimize the event.
25. Find ways to emphasize to the children that you love them.
26. Allow the children to grieve losses.
27. Develop positive anniversary activities to commemorate the event. These events may bring tears, but they are also a time to celebrate survival and the ability to get back to a normal life.

## Connecticut Resources

Department of Mental Health  
and Addiction Services  
[www.ct.gov/dmhas](http://www.ct.gov/dmhas)

Department of Children  
and Families  
[www.ct.gov/dcf](http://www.ct.gov/dcf)

## National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental  
Health Services  
Administration  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)  
1.800.662.HELP (4357)

The National Child Traumatic  
Stress Network  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

### Activities for Children

1. Encourage the children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences. Hang these at the child's level to be seen easily.
2. Write a story of the frightening event. You might start with: Once upon a time there was a terrible \_\_\_\_\_ and it scared us all \_\_\_\_\_. This is what happened: \_\_\_\_\_. Be sure to end with "And we are now safe."
3. Playing with playdough or clay is good for children to release tension and make symbolic creations.
4. Music is fun and valuable for children. Creating music with instruments or rhythm toys helps relieve stress and tension.
5. Provide the children with clothes, shoes, hats, etc. so they can play "dress up" and can pretend to be adults in charge of recovering from the disaster and "being in charge."
6. Make puppets with the children and put on a puppet show for family and friends, or help children put on a skit about what they experienced.
7. Read stories about disasters to and with children.

