

After A Disaster: A Guide For Parents and Teachers



Children and youth can face emotional strains after a traumatic event such as a tornado, car crash, or violence. Young people react to trauma differently than adults. Some may react right away; others may show signs that they are having a difficult time much later. Many of the reactions noted below are normal when children and youth are handling the stress right after an event. If any of these behaviors lasts for more than 2 to 4 weeks, or if they suddenly appear later on, these children may need more help coping.

Possible Reactions To A Disaster Or Traumatic Event

Preschool Children, 0—5 Years Old: Very young children may go back to thumb sucking or wetting the bed at night after a trauma. They may fear strangers, darkness, or monsters. It is fairly common for preschool children to become clingy with a parent, caregiver, or teacher. Children may want to stay in a place where they feel safe. They may express the trauma repeatedly in their play or tell exaggerated stories about what happened. Some children’s eating and sleeping habits may change. They also may have aches and pains that cannot be explained. Other symptoms to watch for are aggressive or withdrawn behavior, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and disobedience.

- **Infants and Toddlers, 0–2 years old,** may start to show the same emotions as their caregivers, or they may act differently, like crying for no reason, withdrawing from people, and not playing with their toys.
- **Children, 3–5 years old,** can understand the effects of trauma. They may have trouble adjusting to change and loss. They may depend on the adults around them to help them feel better.

Early Childhood to Adolescence, 6—19 Years Old: Children and youth in these age ranges may have some of the same reactions to trauma as younger children. Often, younger children want much more attention from parents or caregivers. They may stop doing their school work or chores at home. Some youth may feel helpless and guilty because they cannot take on adult roles as their family or the community responds to a trauma or disaster.

- Youth react to disasters and traumatic events differently than adults and reactions vary by age.
- Young children may cling to their parents or express their trauma repeatedly in their play or tell exaggerated stories about what happened.
- Children may have trouble paying attention and do poorly in school or become aggressive for no clear reason.
- Adolescents may start arguments at home and/or school or engage in risky behavior.
- Parents, caregivers, and teachers can help children express themselves through talking, writing, drawing, and singing.
- **Children, 6–10 years old,** may fear going to school and stop spending time with friends. They may have trouble paying attention and do poorly in school overall. Some may become aggressive for no clear reason. Or they may act younger than their age by asking to be fed or dressed by their parent or caregiver.
- **Youth and Adolescents, 11–19 years old,** go through a lot of physical and emotional changes because of their developmental stage. So, it may be even harder for them to cope with trauma. Older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine “I’m okay” or even silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Some may start arguments at home and/or at school, resisting any structure or authority. They also may engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs.



Wheeler

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How Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers Can Support Children's Recovery

- Parents, caregivers, and teachers can help children express their emotions through conversation, writing, drawing, and singing. Most children want to talk about a trauma, so let them. Accept their feelings and tell them it is okay to feel sad, upset, or stressed. Crying is often a way to relieve stress and grief.
Pay attention and be a good listener.
- Adults can ask the teens and youth they are caring for what they know about the event. What are they hearing in school or seeing on TV? Try to watch news coverage on TV or the Internet with them. And, limit access so they have time away from reminders about the trauma. Don't let talking about the trauma take over the family or classroom discussion for long periods of time.
Allow them to ask questions.
- Adults can help children and youth see the good that can come out of a trauma. Heroic actions, families and friends who help, and support from people in the community are examples. Children may better cope with a trauma or disaster by helping others. They can write caring letters to those who have been hurt or have lost their homes; they can send thank you notes to people who helped.
Encourage these kinds of activities.
- If human violence or error caused an event, be careful not to blame a cultural, racial, or ethnic group, or persons with psychiatric disabilities. This may be a good opportunity to talk with children about discrimination and diversity. **Let children know that they are not to blame when bad things happen.**
- It's okay for children and youth to see adults sad or crying, but try not to show intense emotions. Screaming and hitting or kicking furniture or walls can be scary for children. **Violence can further frighten children or lead to more trauma.**
- Adults can show children and youth how to take care of themselves. If you are in good physical and emotional health, you are more likely to be readily available to support the children you care about. **Model self-care, set routines, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep, exercise, and take deep breaths to handle stress.**

Tips For Talking With Children And Youth Of Different Age Groups After A Disaster Or Traumatic Event

Preschool Children, 0-5 Years Old:

- Take a deep breath before holding or picking them up, and focus on them, not the trauma
- Get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using words they can understand
- Tell them that they will continue to be taken care of so they feel safe

Early Childhood To Adolescence:

- Ask the child or the children what worries them and what might help them cope
- Offer comfort with gentle words or a hug when appropriate
- Spend more time with the children than usual, even for a short while. Returning to school activities and getting back to routines at home is important too.
- Excuse traumatized children from chores for a day or two. After that, make sure they have age-appropriate tasks and can participate in a way that makes them feel useful.
- Support children spending time with friends or having quiet time to write or create art
- Encourage children to participate in recreational activities so they can move around and play with others
- Let children know that people care about them— spend time doing something special with them, and make sure to check on them in a nonintrusive way

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services
<https://portal.ct.gov/DMHAS>

CT Department of Children and
Families

<https://portal.ct.gov/DCF>

United Way 2-1-1

www.211ct.org

2.1.1 or 1.800.203.1234

National Resources

National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

1.800.273.TALK (8255)

