



Talking to Children About Emergencies: Psychological First Aid – A Guide for Educators

Children's reactions to traumatic events will vary by age, development and experiences. They may worry about safety, be triggered by sites, smells or sounds that remind them of the trauma, and may show changes in mood or behavior, such as sadness, numbness, clinging to their adult(s), headaches, poor school performance or withdrawal. Their recovery depends on how the adults around them cope and provide support.

Parents, caregivers and educators can use trauma-informed strategies like Psychological First Aid to ease distress and promote resilience.

Listen to the child/youth's words and actions

- Address feelings/behavior promptly; watch for non-verbal cues.
- Be ready to listen and focus on how you can help.
- Show calmness through body language and tone.
- Validate their experiences.

Protect by maintaining structure, stability and consistency

- Keep daily routines as much as possible and maintain clear and consistent rules.
- Supervise and monitor conversations, including online and media.
- Give accurate, age-appropriate information.
- Ensure a safe physical environment.

Connect through interactions, activities and resources

- Regularly check in with the child/youth.
- Familiarize yourself with school and community resources, and know when to seek additional support.
- Encourage social activities and connections with friends, family and teachers.
- Keep communication open with others involved in the child's life.

Model calm and optimistic behavior

- Be mindful of your own thoughts and feelings.
- Model healthy responses by staying calm, courteous, organized and helpful.
- Use positive coping strategies and demonstrate self-care and compassion.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and highlight how people are coping and coming together after the tragedy.

Teach about normal changes after a stressful event

- Recognize varied reactions to the same event.
- Encourage child/youth to identify and practice strategies for problem solving and positive coping like deep breathing, exercise, creative activities, reading, watching funny videos, listening to calming music or playing games.
- Help identify trusted adults for support.
- Set small, achievable goals and celebrate achievements.



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Talking Points for Different Age Groups

Infants and Toddlers (0-2 years)

- Infants react to the emotions of their caregivers, so try your best to act calm.
- Use a soothing voice and respond consistently to their needs.
- Provide extra physical comfort such as cuddling, holding and rocking.
- Maintain routines for feeding and sleeping as much as possible.

Preschoolers (2-5 years)

- Use simple phrases and reassure them that they will be taken care of.
- Provide opportunities to play and express themselves, such as drawing.
- Be prepared for possible behavioral changes like tantrums or increased clinginess and offer extra love and affection.
- Avoid exposing them to news and media of the event.

School-Aged Children (6-11 years)

- Use real words and facts when talking about the situation to empower them and relieve anxiety.
- Answer their questions briefly and honestly, and correct any misinformation.
- Encourage them to express their concerns and sadness, but do not give too many details about your own anxieties.
- Help them stay busy and provide opportunities to help others to give them a sense of accomplishment and purpose.
- Limit their exposure to news and radio.

Adolescents (12-18 years)

- Recognize that they may try to act as if they are fine, but may need extra support.
- Give them small tasks and responsibilities and praise them for their efforts to help them feel useful.
- Encourage discussions in peer groups or with trusted adults.
- Be aware of substance abuse issues.
- Offer opportunities for them to take action by participating in volunteer opportunities.

Additional Resources

- [LACOE Mental Health & Wellness Resources](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#): Helping Young Children Heal After a Crisis
- [Ready.Gov](#): Psychological First Aid for Educators
- [Child Mind Institute](#): Resources and guides for helping children cope with trauma
- [Sesame Street](#): Resources (guides, videos, and activities) for families.