

How to Help Children After a Disaster

What are some tips for talking to children after a terrorist attack?

- Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they are seeing on television and to ask questions.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you can't answer all their questions.
- Answer questions at a level the child can understand.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for children to talk. They will probably have more questions as time goes on.
- Use this as an opportunity to establish a family emergency plan. Feeling that there is something you can do may be very comforting to both children and adults.
- Allow children to discuss other fears and concerns about unrelated issues. This is a good opportunity to explore these issues also.
- Monitor children's television watching. Some parents may wish to limit their child's exposure to graphic or troubling scenes. To the extent possible, watch reports of the disaster with children. It is at these times that questions might arise.
- Help children understand that there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of reactions is normal. Encourage children to express their feelings to adults (including teachers and parents) who can help them understand their sometimes strong and troubling emotions.
- Try not to focus on blame.
- In addition to the tragic things they see, help children identify good things, such as heroic actions, families who are grateful for being reunited, and the assistance offered by people throughout the country and the world.

What else can be done for children?

For children closer to the disaster scene, more active interventions may be required.

- The family as a unit might consider counseling. Disasters often reawaken a child's fear of loss of parents (frequently their greatest fear) at a time when parents may be preoccupied with their own practical and emotional difficulties.
- Families may choose to permit temporary regressive behavior. Several arrangements may help children separate gradually after the agreed-upon time limit: spending extra time with parents immediately before bedtime, leaving the child's bedroom door slightly ajar, and using a nightlight.

- Many parents have their own fears of leaving a child alone after a disaster or other fears they may be unable to acknowledge. Parents often are more able to seek help on the children's behalf and may, in fact, use the children's problems as a way of asking for help for themselves and other family members.
- Teachers also can help children with similar art and play activities, as well as by encouraging group discussions in the classroom and informational presentations about the disaster.