

The graphic features the letters 'PTSD' in large, bold, red 3D font, set against a background of smaller, white 3D letters. A red horizontal bar at the bottom contains the text 'Awareness Month' in white. The background letters include words like 'SKILL', 'PERVIGILANCE', 'STRESS', 'ANXIETY', and 'MAY'.

# PTSD Awareness Month

All children may experience traumatic events affecting how they think and feel. It's important to understand it's not the nature of the event itself rather the personal experience in response to the event which determines whether it's traumatic or not. Most of the time, children are resilient, recover quickly, and well with the support of their families, friends, teachers, and other caring adults.

Parents' or adults' reactions to traumatic events can shape the way children react and their perceptions of safety. Here are some suggestions about how to help children cope and process traumatic events in the healthiest way.\*

Make time to talk - Let children know they are welcome to ask questions and express their concerns and feelings. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient as children do not always talk about their feelings readily. If they don't want to talk, let them know you are available when they are ready.

Reassure children about their safety - Let children talk about their feelings, assist them in expressing their concerns appropriately, help them put their thoughts into perspective, and validate their behavior is normal when a tragedy occurs. Talk with children about their concerns over safety, review procedures at home and school, and discuss changes occurring in the community.

Limit exposure to the media – Protect your child from too much coverage about the event, including on the internet, radio, television, or other social media platforms. Explain to them how the media can provide inaccurate information, trigger fears, and subject them to comments that might be misunderstood. Let them know they can distract themselves with another activity or they can talk to you about how they are feeling.

Maintain normal routines – Keeping a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical and mental health. Ensure children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their household chores, schoolwork, and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Address acting out behaviors - Help children understand "acting out" is a dangerous way to express strong feelings over what happened. Talk with them about other ways of coping with their feelings such as hobbies, listening to music, writing in a journal, reading a book, or spending time with others.

Manage reminders - Help children identify reminders and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. Support your child coping with these reminders and provide them extra comfort during these times.

## TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Parents and adults play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and security for children after a traumatic event occurs. It's important to keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.

- **Early Elementary School** – Children need brief, simple information and concrete examples balanced by reassurances of their safety.
- **Upper Elementary and Early Middle School** – Children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they are truly safe and what is being done. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Answer questions and discuss efforts to provide safety.
- **Upper Middle and High School** – Adolescent and teen-age children will often have strong and varied opinions about the event. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make traumatic events safer for society. Emphasize the role they have in following safety guidelines, reporting concerns to authorities, and how to get help for emotional needs.

\*National Association of School Psychologists (2016) "Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers" Available at [Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers \(nasponline.org\)](https://www.nasponline.org/talking-to-children-about-violence).

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Monitor changes in relationships - Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Emphasize everyone needs support during this time. Encourage tolerance for how others may be recovering or feeling differently.

Observe children's emotional state - Notice changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns to indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort as they may not express their concerns verbally.

It's not known exactly why some children develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and others do not. Many factors may play a role, including previous experiences, biological vulnerabilities, proximity to the event, support systems, and other stressors which interfere with their ability to process and recover.

Symptoms of PTSD include:

- Reliving the event over and over in thought or in play
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Becoming very upset when something causes memories of the event
- Intense ongoing fear or sadness
- Irritability and angry outbursts
- Constantly looking for possible threats or being easily startled
- Acting helpless, hopeless, or withdrawn
- Denying the event happened or feeling numb
- Avoiding places or people associated with the event

When children develop symptoms lasting longer than one month which are upsetting or interfering with their relationships and activities, they may be diagnosed with PTSD.

The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider to arrange an evaluation. Once a PTSD diagnosis is made, psychotherapy where the child can speak, draw, play, or write about the stressful event can be done with them, the family, or a group. Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps children learn to change thoughts and feelings by first changing behavior to decrease the symptoms.

As a parent, you can't protect your children from ever experiencing traumatic events; but you can help them express their feelings, comfort them, help them feel safer, and teach them how to deal with the trauma. By allowing and encouraging them to express their feelings, you can help them build healthy coping skills which will serve them well in the future and give them the confidence they need to overcome adversity.

\*Source: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Parents Guideline for Helping Youth After the Recent Shooting" Available at [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//parents\\_guidelines\\_for\\_helping\\_youth\\_after\\_the\\_recent\\_shooting](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//parents_guidelines_for_helping_youth_after_the_recent_shooting).

## BOOKS TO HELP CHILDREN WITH TRAGIC NEWS

The impact of tragic news is often felt in communities across the country even those not directly affected by the event itself. Don't delay in telling your children what's happened. You want to be able to convey the facts and set the emotional tone to support and reassure them they are safe. The following books for children ages 4 through 8 may be helpful in having these tough conversations.\*

- "There Was a Hole" by Adam Lehrhaupt on coping with grief and loss.
- "The Breaking News" by Sarah Lynne Reul about community, resiliency, and optimism.
- "Catching Thoughts" by Bonnie Clark on anxiety, unwelcome thoughts, and mindfulness.
- "Kids Can Cope: Put Your Worries Away" by Gill Hasson about learning to deal with anxiety, nervousness, or fear.
- "Most People" by Michael Leannah on finding the good in distressing times.
- "I'm Not Scared...I'm Prepared!" by Julia Cook about what happens when a dangerous someone enters school.

\*Yu, Yi-Jin (2022) "How to Use Books to Help Kids Cope and Talk After a School Shooting" Available at <https://www.yahoo.com/gma/books-help-kids-cope-talk-135006601.html>.