

Helping Young Children Cope with Upsetting Events

- ✓ Young children can be affected by upsetting events, even if they seem unaware.
- ✓ Children of the same age, exposed to the same event, may show very different reactions.
- ✓ Reconnecting children with familiar adults and routines helps them manage their feelings about scary events.
- ✓ Most children will recover on their own without needing any services.

What should I say? What can I do to help my child?

<i>When I act this way, I want you to know that:</i>	<i>You can help me when you:</i>
I might try to get your attention because I am scared or worried that something might happen to us.	Spend a little more time with me. Remember that I am not trying to bother you or make you mad.
Sometimes I worry that scary things will happen in my neighborhood again.	You can help me by telling me that you are doing everything you can to keep me safe.
Sometimes I cry and cling to people I love because I worry that they will not come back if they leave.	You can help me say “good bye” and tell me that you will always come back.
I don’t like to do some things that remind me of the scary things I saw or heard about.	Be patient with me, and if you can, don’t make me do things that remind me of what happened if it still makes me too upset or scared.
I am confused about what happened in my neighborhood, so I ask a lot of questions.	Remember that I am curious and trying to learn. Tell me honestly what happened, using words I can understand, but do not provide complicated or gory details. Notice my cues if I’m getting upset. Help me express myself by drawing a picture about what I know and how I feel.
I try to make sense of what happened when I play over and over or talk a lot about things I saw or heard, such as fires, police, weapons, or people hitting each other.	Understand that I need help making sense of what happened. Do not let me see it on TV or other media if the story is in the news. Reassure me that you are doing everything you can to keep me safe.
I might have physical reactions like stomach aches and headaches.	Help me do things that make me feel calm, and spend time doing fun things with me. Help me relax at bedtime by reading stories, listening to music and reminding me that you will keep me safe.
I might show you that I am feeling scared by crying, hitting, or biting.	Understand that I may be acting out because I am scared or confused about what happened. Please stay calm and be patient with me while setting limits.

When should I seek additional support? Below is a more complete list of common reactions in young children. After several weeks, if you notice any of these behaviors are not improving, or if you are concerned about your child at any time, you may need some additional support.

- ✓ Physical complaints, like upset stomach or headache
- ✓ Repeatedly talking about or playing about what they saw or heard
- ✓ Nightmares or distressing memories during the day
- ✓ Startling easily to loud noises, being jumpy
- ✓ Separation anxiety, clinginess, fussiness, or other new fears (the dark, monsters, going to the bathroom alone)
- ✓ Regression in development (loss of toilet training skills, baby talk) or new difficulties sleeping or eating
- ✓ Fighting, biting, or hitting

If you have concerns about your child, please talk to your child’s teacher, school mental health consultant, school principal/director, or counselor/therapist to obtain information and referrals.