



Helping Children when Violence Occurs

Children may be especially vulnerable due to their limited life experiences and developmental levels. This is particularly relevant when they are exposed to anxiety producing events that are unusual or beyond the normal everyday issues they deal with.

No matter how frightening some feelings are, it is more frightening if no one addresses them. If we are silent, the children who depend on us may experience the added fear that we are not able to take care of them.

Adults are in a position to create an atmosphere of security, stability, and support, which will provide a cushion against the full impact of the threatening environment. Thus, it is important that adults first acknowledge their own feelings of uncertainty and find suitable ways to lessen their anxiety. Remember, these reactions may be a normal response to an extraordinary situation. People have different ways of coping and need to do what is best for them. Identify your individual way of coping.

1. **Be there and be calm:** Ask children what they know and what they have heard. Listen to the child's story, follow the child's lead, and be reassuring about the ways that you will take care of them. Use simple language and correct any misunderstood accounts. Tell a child what they need to know, not all that you know. For example, say something like "Some people did some bad things and other people were hurt. But you are safe here and we will protect you." Practice these conversations with other adults.

2. **Give permission for many different feelings:** Infants experience the emotions of sad, mad, glad and worried. As children grow, they experience and express sad, mad, glad, excited, scared and frustrated, and more. Avoid imposing meanings or interpretations on children, but allow them to feel what they feel. Often children will explain their feelings through their body states. Consider asking "where" do they feel as well as "how" do they feel.

3. **Share your feelings:** It is okay and important for children to know that the adults in their lives have the same feelings when bad things happen. Let children know you feel these feelings and that you are there for them. It is important, however, that you remain in control. Monitor your own emotion and tone of voice. Pay attention to your gestures, affect, and voice because children pay special attention to these ways of communicating. You can help children feel safer and calmer when your behaviors convey these feelings. If your own reaction is difficult to manage, enlist another adult to help you.

4. Limit repeat exposure to images and reports of the events: Recognize the impact of media on children. Provide an opportunity to discuss what they have seen or heard. When children do see images or reports of tragedies, Fred Rogers of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* suggests that we help them “look for all the people who are helping”. Couple the sad tragedy with the comforting presence of others who are helping and taking care of others.

5. Remember the 3R’s of security: Relationships, Routines and Restoration: Both children and adults need the basic “R’s” of safety for comfort and reassurance at times of uncertainty. Highlight relationships with familiar and consistent caregivers, family and friends. Protect and increase routines that are familiar and normalizing such as play time, going to school, reading books, and other patterned activities. Remember the body and the importance of restoration, including appropriate sleeping and eating patterns, and time-limited regression to previously used ways of feeling better, i.e. hugs and physical touch, sensory-based ‘soothies’ like a blanket, stuffed animal or pacifier, and expression of emotion like crying, clinging, whining or wailing.

6. Intervene with the developmental age and stage of the child in mind: Infants require comfort, familiar attachment figures, holding, protection and restoration of order. As language and imagination grow, toddlers and very young children need simple words, repeated reassurances, acceptance of time-limited regression, constant monitoring and love. At each developmental period, the availability and empathic response of a caring, familiar adult begins the process of remediation.

7. Intervene with the particular learning style and temperament of the child in mind: Children with autism and other special needs may process information – gestures, pictures and language – in different ways. Often a “4L’s” strategy may help: Less Language and Longer Latency. This means that you can use fewer words and wait longer for a reply. Ask the child what they were thinking and feeling and even draw pictures or tell stories. Use your own facial expressions, voice and words to reflect and “tune in” to their emotions. If helpful, use pictures or drawings to identify and label different feelings. Be prepared for misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and keep clarifying and reassuring the child that you will be sure they are safe.

8. Provide structure and communicate safety: Uncertainty is the province of adulthood. While we as adults may feel unsure of the possibility of future tragedies, we must always let children know that we will take care of them and protect them. Children thrive when provided structure and safety.

9. Recognize that there are some feelings that we can only share and cannot fix: Children need us to be there with and for them at such times. It’s appropriate to both not have an answer and be with the children in their sadness and confusion.

10. Remember to take care of yourself: If the adults in a child’s life are overwhelmed, overstressed and overtired, it will be more difficult to be safe, secure and stable for the child. Pay attention to the “ABC’s” of self-care: awareness, balance and connection, in your own life. Enlist other adults to help you process what has happened and support you in your support of the child