



WHEN SOMETHING AWFUL HAS HAPPENED:

Helping children during a disaster

Disasters or traumatic events can affect children as much as adults. Some children may be affected without anyone knowing. Others may experience reactions immediately after the event, some months later. A child needs to know that many different types of feelings are normal during and after the event and that it is okay to talk about the event. It is important to answer questions at a level the child can understand. This handout is designed to help you understand the reactions children may experience at different ages and helpful responses.

THE PRE SCHOOL CHILD (ages 1-5)

These children are particularly vulnerable to any disruptions in their secure world. Because they lack coping skills, they look to family members for support and comfort. Fears of abandonment are very strong and children need special reassurance about their safety and their loved ones.

TYPICAL RESPONSES	HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS
Thumb sucking and bedwetting	Verbal reassurance and physical comfort
Fear of strangers, the dark and “monsters”	Help express feelings through play, drawing and storytelling
Exaggerated stories about the trauma	Avoid separation
Clinging to parents	Stick to routine family routines
Changes in eating and/or sleeping	Calm, comforting pre bedtime routines
Hyperactivity, disobedience, aggressive or withdrawn behavior	Allow child to sleep in parent’s room for limited time
Speech difficulties	Limit TV, media exposure
Fears for their safety	

ELEMENTARY AGE CHILDREN (ages 5-11)

May experience similar reactions as younger children. Regressive behavior is common.

TYPICAL RESPONSES	HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS
Childlike behavior such as asking to be feed or dressed	Patience and tolerance, extra attention
Whining and clinging	Discuss with child their experience
Loss of interest and poor concentration	Structured home chores and activities that are not too demanding
School avoidance	Develop and review safety plan for future incidents
Aggressive behavior at home or at school	Gentle but firm limit setting
Withdrawal from friends	Explain how people helped each other during the event

PREADOLESCENTS/ADOLESCENTS (ages 12-17)

Peer reactions are especially. They want to know their reactions are normal and shared by others. Disruption of their peer group is especially distressing.

TYPICAL RESPONSES	HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS
Sleep and appetite disturbances	Extra attention and consideration
Loss of interest in peer activities	Encourage discussion of experience with peers
Rebellion or delinquent behavior	Encourage group activities geared toward resumption of activities such as athletics, clubs and school events
School difficulties such as fighting, attention seeking behavior	Promote involvement with community recovery work
Physical complaints such as headaches, vague aches and pains	Be available to listen but don’t force discussion
High risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use	



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When to seek help

If you think your child's behavior does not seem to be returning to normal after a couple of weeks you should seek help from a mental health professional who is trained to work with children.

Resources

- Your Primary Care Physician (PCP) / Your Pediatrician
- Boston Emergency Services Team (BEST) – Mental Health Crisis Line **800.981.4357**
- MGH Acute Psychiatry Service (APS) – 24hr psychiatrists. **617.724.7688**
- **911** or the nearest emergency room if suicidal or dangerous thoughts

More Information

- www.apahelpcenter.com
- www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov