

# Helping Children Cope After A Disaster



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Pediatric Trauma Program  
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## Introduction

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The care of a child goes beyond the  
initial reaction or the physical injuries in a  
disaster situation.

Your child and family members are  
emotionally affected by the events when  
the disaster happens and for some time  
afterwards.

The reactions to the stress after a  
traumatic event are usually relatively brief  
for a child. It is difficult to predict how  
each child will react, when the reaction will  
occur and how long it will last.

We hope this information will help  
you recognize the signs of stress that your  
child may be showing and when some symp-  
toms can lead to long term difficulties.

If you have questions or need  
additional help please call your county  
Mental Health Program or contact your  
physician for a referral

## Disasters and Your Child's Reactions

After a stressful or traumatic event, your child may react differently to normal or unexpected events.

Some examples of traumatic events are:

- \* Being in a car crash
- \* Death of a family member
- \* Seeing violence in the home, the community or on television
- \* Being in a natural disaster such as a fire or flood.
- \* Being in a disaster caused by others such as terrorists.

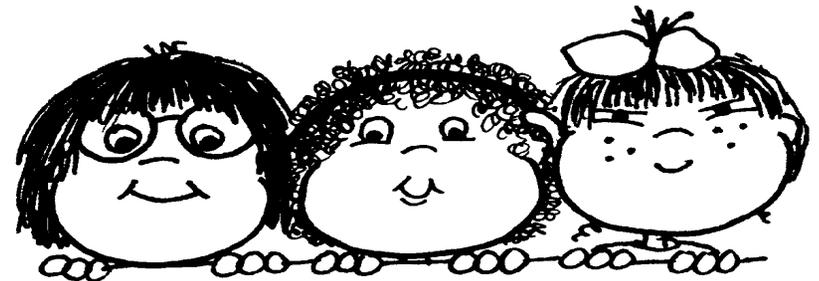
Following a disaster and when a child is in the home or community, there can be other events that are especially stressful such as:

- \* **Being separated from parents**
- \* Being exposed to television news
- \* Feeling a loss of control
- \* Being anxious
- \* Being exposed to other's stories of trauma or disaster

## Closing

With your help, your child can learn to cope with the events of the trauma. We hope this booklet is helpful.

If you have any suggestions for additions to this booklet, please contact us at Penn State Hershey Medical Center at (717) 531-7161.



## Factors Affecting Your Child's Response to Trauma

- \* **What is the age and developmental level of your child ?**

*Each age level has a different way to cope and things they are afraid of. Ask your child's doctor for guidance.*

- \* **What was the cause of the trauma ?**

*Does your child imagine that he /she caused the events ?*

- \* **Were there injuries or death of family members or close friends ?**

*What was the child's relationship with those who were hurt ?*

- \* **What is the reaction of parents, friends, and caregivers to the disaster or to your child's distress ?**

*Often if the parents or others are having trouble coping , your child may sense the difference in their relationship.*

- \* **What does the child think about the disaster and what is happening around them ?**

- \* **Is your child in pain or anxious ?**

## Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress

Parents should be alert to these signs that indicate your child may be feeling continued stress after traumatic events.

- \* Refusal to return to school and "clinging behavior"
- \* Shadowing the mother or father around the house
- \* Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep or bed wetting
- \* Have problems staying or falling asleep
- \* Loss of concentration and irritability
- \* Behavior problems, which are not typical for the child, like misbehaving in school or at home
- \* Physical complaints (Stomachache, headache, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found
- \* Withdrawal from family and friends
- \* Decreased activity
- \* Preoccupation with the events
- \* Acting younger than their age

## Taking Care of Yourself

Adults can have the same symptoms as children after a traumatic event. In order to help your child, you need to deal with your own feelings and take care of yourself.

### Tips for Parents

- \* Get rest when you can
- \* Eat when you can
- \* Take a walk or exercise each day
- \* Create a support system of friends, family or clergy to share your feelings and fears



## Feelings of the Stressed Child

When we feel threatened, our body and minds will make changes in the way we think and respond differently to events and how our body works.

Following a traumatic event, your child may be :

- \* agitated or overactive
- \* confused
- \* afraid
- \* angry
- \* sad
- \* nervous or anxious
- \* scared
- \* guilty
- \* withdrawn
- \* afraid to be alone
- \* avoiding situations or places that remind them of the trauma
- \* having trouble believing the trauma happened .



## Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The most important thing to remember is that your child's mental health needs are as important as their physical needs.

Stress reactions are common for most children after a traumatic event. Sometimes the feelings can be so strong that your child can have problems doing the things they usually do like going to school, playing and being happy.

For most children, the stress reactions to the traumatic event go away. For other children, they continue or increase. This is called posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

## Listen to the Children Interview

These are questions to ask children that are directly or indirectly involved in trauma to determine their awareness, knowledge, needs and misconceptions.

- \* Where were you at the time of the event?
- \* What happened where you were?
- \* How did it happen?
- \* Why did it happen?
- \* What were your thoughts and feelings - then and now?
- \* What did you do to help yourself - then and now?
- \* What did others do to help you - then and now?

## Helping Your Child Cope

- \* Reunite immediately with parent or caregiver.
- \* Answer questions reassuringly but honestly. Don't avoid difficult questions.
- \* Don't be afraid to let your child talk about the event.
- \* Listen to your child's views of the events at the time of the disaster and about the events that followed. Ask open ended questions so he/she can express feelings about these events.
- \* Provide "consistency" in the day. Help your child know what will happen.
- \* Reassure them that they are safe. Let your child know you love them and know how they may be upset.
- \* Help caregivers tell your child what they are doing to care for them if your child is injured. Reinforce that caregivers are "helping you to get better".
- \* Try to limit activities that may cause anxiety such as television news, scary movies or stories.

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## What Next? How Can I Help My Child ?

The best treatment is to recognize that your child is having difficulties that are not resolving and seek help.

### Who Can Help ?

- \* Your Child 's Primary Care Physician
- \* Clergy
- \* Teachers
- \* Friends
- \* **You**

### Need Additional Help ?

If the symptoms are severe or persistent you may need professional help. You and your child may need to be seen by a child and adolescent psychiatrist. There are listings by county in the Blue Pages of the phone book under "Mental Health." In each county, there are mental health workers that can help you find services for children after traumatic events.

See [www.childadvocate.net](http://www.childadvocate.net) for resources.

You can also contact your health insurance company for agencies in your area that provide mental health services for children.

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