

Disaster and Trauma – Helping our Children Cope

The Inova Health System behavioral health services are saddened to hear of the recent shooting outside of Nationals Park this weekend and empathize with the caregivers and youth who were present during this terrifying event. As gun violence continues to be a frequent occurrence in our communities, the psychological toll this exposure can have on our children is profound. Children look to caregivers for guidance when a traumatic event has happened; your emotions and communication about the event is important to help them process and understand what has happened. We encourage caregivers to speak with their children about this event.

What are common reactions that I can expect from my child?

Anxiety, sadness, fear, and worries about safety can be common and are understandable after a traumatic event. Children may look to adults around them for reassurance, and younger children may not verbalize but be more clingy. Other children may talk repeatedly or need to process the event repeatedly over several days. Initially, children may experience heightened sensitivity to loud sounds or even transient changes in sleep or appetite. Some children may have behavioral issues immediately following the event, such as tantrums or outbursts. Acknowledging that these are common immediate reactions to trauma can help your and your child's anxiety.

How do I talk to my child after an event?

This is often the most important thing caregivers can do after a traumatic event, as children can feel frightened or confused. Here are some tips on how to talk to your child:

1. Let your child know that you are available to talk at anytime. Keep the door to conversation open. Let them know that you are interested and want to know how they are doing.
2. Know that every child processes things differently and there is no one-size-fits-all response to a traumatic event. Younger children, especially, may not be ready or able to talk about a frightening event. Understand that outbursts may be a form of expression and help your child understand this. Give them alternatives to express their feelings; through art, play or music.
3. Listen to your child's thoughts and point of view without interrupting. Be patient with their words and behaviors.
4. Allow your child to share their feelings without feeling the need to correct or negate them – validate and let them express. Acknowledge that different children respond differently, and that there are no wrong feelings.
5. At the same time, listen for misinformation or information that is not factual and gently correct without putting your child down.
6. Tell your child that you understand how they feel and acknowledge the frightening parts of the event. It is OK to share that you felt scared.
7. Reassure – tell your child that he/she is loved and that you will care for them. Reinforce safety and security.

8. Be available to answer questions. Explain with language that is appropriate to your child's developmental age. Limit details for younger children, while being honest and factual. It is ok to let your child know that you do not know if you do not have the answer to a question, but that you will try to find out.
9. Be aware of your own anxiety and how you talk about the event. You are often the barometer for your child. Children may not understand adult context/conversation and fill in the missing pieces, which can create more anxiety.

What else can I do to help my child?

1. Keep things at home consistent and try to return to your routine as soon as possible. This builds coping and confidence
2. Know that not every child is ready to talk. Offer other ways of expressing themselves such as drawing, working with clay, playing or using music.
3. Help children with hypersensitivity to noise recognize that they are safe. Talk through causes of a loud sound and help children develop self-talk that they can use to remind themselves that they are safe.
4. Make your home feel safe and respond to your child's needs. Plan activities to do as a family to reestablish and reinforce routine and family time.
5. Limit exposure to television and the news. Seeing repeated images of a traumatic event in the media can be distressing for children. When they do see information in the media, talk to them about what they saw and what they understood.
6. If you are overwhelmed, phone a friend or another trusted adult to provide backup and support.
7. Watch for signs of stress or anxiety.

What should I look for to take the next step?

1. Prolonged difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite or mood, or persistent anxiety that disrupts daily routines or functioning.
2. Changes in routine or "regression" to prior behaviors such as bedwetting
3. Preoccupation with the event or intrusive thoughts or worries that are not going away.
4. Decline in school functioning, difficulty attending school or separating from parents, social withdrawal, physical complaints that are prolonged (headaches, stomachaches).
5. Engaging in harmful behaviors or lack of interest in usual activities.

All of these may be signs that you need to seek help from a medical professional.

Where should I turn to seek help?

Please consult your pediatrician, family physician, school counselor, or a psychiatrist or licensed therapist for prolonged issues, lasting for weeks after a traumatic event.

The following are resources for parents and families following a crisis:

American Academy for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Disaster Resource Center -
https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Disaster_Resource_Center/Resources_for_Parents_Disaster.aspx

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network - <https://www.nctsn.org/>

American Psychological Association - <https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime/mass-shooting>