



# A Guide for Refugee Parents

How can I help  
my traumatised child?

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## A GUIDE FOR REFUGEE PARENTS

# How can I help my traumatised child?

Perhaps you have fled your homeland because it has been destroyed, or because a war is going on there. You have left the home that you shared with your family. And on your journey to Germany, you may also have experienced great hardship.

Perhaps you fled your homeland because you felt that your life and that of your children was threatened. Many things were also very difficult while on the run. People who have experienced such unsafe circumstances are sometimes haunted by the memories for a long time. The images of threatening events are particularly hard to forget. The fear associated with them plagues the mind and soul. It is normal and human to feel this way, but sometimes the memories remain alive.

*Such extraordinarily threatening experiences can leave people psychologically injured.*

*Psychotherapists refer to this condition as trauma, which means "wound".*

The memories of a terrible event sometimes continue to hurt like a physical wound. Such memories are sometimes unlike any you have ever experienced. When you think about these threatening events, it can be like living through them all over again. Rather than it feeling like something that occurred in the past, it is as though the experience itself returns with the memories. And rather than these memories gradually becoming fainter, they remain strong and vivid – making it difficult to lead a normal life again.

It can be a similar experience for your children. Perhaps you have noticed changes in their behaviour. Perhaps your child has become very easily frightened. Perhaps he or she sleeps poorly and is woken by nightmares. Children and teenagers are especially sensitive, and may be particularly shaken by threatening experiences.

Children and teenagers react in very different ways to overwhelming events. Some become withdrawn, sad, and depressed. Others become very restless and much more active. Older children might suddenly begin behaving like young children. They may, for example, wet their beds again. Other children become very demanding and want to be in control of everything around them. Some older children and teenagers will believe that they have no future. They will say that they won't grow up and become adults.

## How can parents help?

Try to make your child feel as safe and protected as possible. Be understanding when they are afraid. Tell them that you understand what they are feeling. Explain to them that they don't need to be afraid anymore, that the war is now far away, and that they are no longer threatened by it in Germany.

Show them that you love them and that you love being with them. Spend time with them, and avoid leaving them alone in unfamiliar settings as much as possible. What your child needs most is security.

Children should not be nagged or reprimanded for not forgetting terrible events – for not pulling themselves together and behaving normally again. Understand that, even though they want to, they are unable to make the memories go away.

*Children haunted by memories should feel accepted, along with their feelings about the memories. If they want to, they should be allowed to express their feelings. They should be allowed to cry and be angry.*

Compelling your child to hide his or her thoughts and feelings doesn't make those thoughts and feelings go away. Not only do the thoughts and feelings remain, but it becomes harder for your child to live with them.

Sometimes when young children are playing, they will re-enact the events they have experienced. Don't stop them from doing this, as it helps them come to terms with the memories.

If your child has become very withdrawn, you can gently try to talk about the experience with him or her. You can also suggest drawing a picture about it.

If the changes in your child's behaviour remain for weeks and months, you should seek the help of a specialist – one who is familiar with the mental suffering of children and teenagers. In Germany, these specialists are called *Kinder- und Jugendlichenpsychotherapeuten* (child and adolescent psychotherapists) or *Kinder- und Jugendpsychiater* (child and adolescent psychiatrists).

To find out more about how to help your child, you can read the information in this guide. It has been arranged by age group.\*

\*The source of the material used in this publication is the manual "Psychological First Aid: Field operations guide" produced and published by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD. Where necessary, the material was amended to address the special circumstances and needs of refugees.

# Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters\*

## If your child has problems sleeping, doesn't want to go to bed, won't sleep alone, wakes up at night screaming

### Understand

- ▶ When children are scared, they want to be with people who help them feel safe, and they worry when you are not together.
- ▶ If you were separated during the disaster, going to bed alone may remind your child of that separation.
- ▶ Bedtime is a time for remembering because we are not busy doing other things. Children often dream about things they fear and can be scared of going to sleep.

### Ways to help

- ▶ If you want, let your child sleep with you. Let him know this is just for now.
- ▶ Have a bedtime routine: a story, a prayer, cuddle time. Tell him the routine (every day), so he knows what to expect.
- ▶ Hold him and tell him that he is safe, that you are there and will not leave. Understand that he is not being difficult on purpose. This may take time, but when he feels safer, he will sleep better.

## If your child worries something bad will happen to you (You may also have worries like this)

### Understand

- ▶ It is natural to have fears like this after being in danger.
- ▶ These fears may be even stronger if your child was separated from loved ones during the disaster.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Remind your child and yourself that right now you are safe.
- ▶ If you are not safe, talk about how you are working to keep her safe.

\*© Brymer M, Jacobs A, Layne C, Pynoos R, Ruzek J, Steinberg A, Vernberg E, Watson P, (National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD), Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition. July, 2006. Available on: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) and [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov).

- ▶ Make a plan for who would care for your child if something did happen to you. This may help you worry less.
- ▶ Do positive activities together to help her think about other things.

## If your child cries or complains whenever you leave him, even when you go to the bathroom

### If your child can't stand to be away from you

#### Understand

- ▶ Children who cannot yet speak or say how they feel may show their fear by clinging or crying.
- ▶ Goodbyes may remind your child of any separation you had related to the disaster.
- ▶ Children's bodies react to separations (stomach sinks, heart beats faster). Something inside says, "Oh no, I can't lose her."
- ▶ Your child is not trying to manipulate or control you. He is scared.
- ▶ He may also get scared when other people (not just you) leave. Goodbyes make him scared.

#### Ways to help

- ▶ Try to stay with your child and avoid separations right now.
- ▶ For brief separations (store, bathroom), help your child by naming his feelings and linking them to what he has been through. Let him know you love him and that this goodbye is different, you'll be back soon. "You're so scared. You don't want me to go because last time I was gone you didn't know where I was. This is different, and I'll be right back."
- ▶ For longer separations, have him stay with familiar people, tell him where you are going and why, and when you will come back. Let him know you will think about him. Leave a photo or something of yours and call if you can. When you come back, tell him you missed him, thought about him, and did come back. You will need to say this over and over.

## If your child has problems eating, eats too much or refuses food

### Understand

- ▶ Stress affects your child in different ways, including her appetite.
- ▶ Eating healthfully is important, but focusing too much on eating can cause stress and tension in your relationship.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Relax. Usually, as your child's level of stress goes down, her eating habits will return to normal. Don't force your child to eat.
- ▶ Eat together and make meal times fun and relaxing.
- ▶ Keep healthy snacks around. Young children often eat on the go.
- ▶ If you are worried, or if your child loses a significant amount of weight, consult a pediatrician.

## If your child is not able to do things he used to do (like use the potty)

### If your child does not talk like he used to

### Understand

- ▶ Often when young children are stressed or scared, they temporarily lose abilities or skills they recently learned.
- ▶ This is the way young children tell us that they are not okay and need our help.
- ▶ Losing an ability after children have gained it (like starting to wet the bed again) can make them feel ashamed or embarrassed. Caregivers should be understanding and supportive.
- ▶ Your child is not doing this on purpose.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Avoid criticism. It makes him worried that he'll never learn.
- ▶ Do not force your child. It creates a power struggle.
- ▶ Instead of focusing on the ability (like not using the potty), help your child feel understood, accepted, loved, and supported.
- ▶ As your child feels safer, he will recover the ability he lost.

## If your child is reckless, does dangerous things

### Understand

- ▶ It may seem strange, but when children feel unsafe, they often behave in unsafe ways.
- ▶ It is one way of saying, "I need you. Show me I'm important by keeping me safe."

### Ways to help

- ▶ Keep her safe. Calmly go and get her and hold her if necessary.
- ▶ Let her know that what she is doing is unsafe, that she is important, and you wouldn't want anything to happen to her.
- ▶ Show her other more positive ways that she can have your attention.

## If your child is scared by things that did not scare her before

### Understand

- ▶ Young children believe their parents are all-powerful and can protect them from anything. This belief helps them feel safe.
- ▶ Because of what happened, this belief has been damaged, and without it, the world is a scarier place.
- ▶ Many things may remind your child of the disaster (ambulances, people yelling, a scared look on your face), and will scare her.
- ▶ It is not your fault – it was the disaster.

### Ways to help

- ▶ When your child is scared, talk to her about how you will keep her safe.
- ▶ If things remind your child of the disaster and cause her to worry that it is happening again, help her understand how what is happening now (like people yelling) is different from the disaster.
- ▶ If she talks about monsters, join her in chasing them out. "Go away monster. Don't bother my baby. I'm going to tell the monster boo, and it will get scared and go away. Boo, boo."
- ▶ Your child is too young to understand and recognize how you did protect her, but remind yourself of the good things you did.



## If your child seems “hyper”, can’t sit still, and doesn’t pay attention to anything

### Understand

- ▶ Fear can create nervous energy that stays in our bodies.
- ▶ Adults sometimes pace when worried. Young children run, jump, and fidget.
- ▶ When our minds are stuck on bad things, it is hard to pay attention to other things.
- ▶ Some children are naturally active.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Help your child to recognize his feelings (fear, worry) and reassure your child that he is safe.
- ▶ Help your child get rid of nervous energy (stretching, running, sports, breathing deep and slow).
- ▶ Sit with him and do an activity you both enjoy (throw a ball, read books, play, draw). Even if he doesn’t stop running around, this helps him.
- ▶ If your child is naturally active, focus on the positive. Think of all the energy he has to get things done, and find activities that fit his needs.

## If your child plays in a violent way

## If your child keeps talking about the disaster and the bad things he saw

### Understand

- ▶ Young children often talk through play. Violent play can be their way of telling us how crazy things were or are, and how they feel inside.
- ▶ When your child talks about what happened, strong feelings may come up both for you and your child (fear, sadness, anger).

### Ways to help

- ▶ If you can tolerate it, listen to your child when he “talks.”
- ▶ As your child plays, notice the feelings he has and help him by naming feelings and being there to support him (hold him, soothe him).
- ▶ If he gets overly upset, spaces out, or he plays out the same upsetting scene, help him calm down, help him feel safe, and consider getting professional help.

## If your child is now very demanding and controlling

### If your child seems "stubborn" insisting that things be done her way

#### Understand

- ▶ Between the age of 18 months to 3 years, young children often seem "controlling."
- ▶ It can be annoying, but it is a normal part of growing up and helps them learn that they are important and can make things happen.
- ▶ When children feel unsafe, they may become more controlling than usual. This is one way of dealing with fears. They are saying, "Things are so crazy I need control over something."

#### Ways to help

- ▶ Remember your child is not controlling or bad. This is normal, but may be worse right now because she feels unsafe.
- ▶ Let your child have control over small things. Give her choices over what she wears or eats, games you play, stories you read. If she has control over small things, it can make her feel better. Balance giving her choices and control with giving her structure and routines. She will feel unsafe if she "runs the show."
- ▶ Cheer her on as she tries new things. She can also feel more in control when she can put her shoes on, put a puzzle together, pour juice.

## If your child has tantrums and is cranky

### If your child yells a lot – more than usual

#### Understand

- ▶ Even before the disaster, your child may have had tantrums. They are a normal part of being little. It's frustrating when you can't do things and when you don't have the words to say what you want or need.
- ▶ Now, your child has a lot to be upset about (just like you) and may really need to cry and yell.

#### Ways to help

- ▶ Let him know you understand how hard this is for him. "Things are really bad right now. It's been so scary. We don't have your toys or TV, and you're mad."
- ▶ Tolerate tantrums more than you usually would, and respond with love rather than discipline. You might not normally do this, but things are not normal. If he cries or yells, stay with him and let him know you are there for him. Reasonable limits should be set if tantrums become frequent or are extreme.

## If your child hits you

### Understand

- ▶ For children, hitting is a way of expressing anger.
- ▶ When children can hit adults they feel unsafe. It's scary to be able to hit someone who's supposed to protect you.
- ▶ Hitting can also come from seeing other people hit each other.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Each time your child hits, let her know that this is not okay. Hold her hands, so she can't hit, have her sit down. Say something like, "It's not okay to hit, it's not safe. When you hit, you are going to need to sit down."
- ▶ If she is old enough, give her the words to use or tell her what she needs to do. Tell her, "Use your words. Say, I want that toy."
- ▶ Help her express anger in other ways (play, talk, draw).
- ▶ If you are having conflicts with other adults, try to work it out in private, away from where your child can see or hear you. If needed, talk with a friend or professional about your feelings.

## If your child says "Go away, I hate you!"

## If your child says "This is all your fault."

### Understand

- ▶ The real problem is the disaster and everything that followed, but your child is too little to fully understand that.
- ▶ When things go wrong, young children often get mad at their parents because they believe they should have stopped it from happening.
- ▶ You are not to blame, but now is not the time to defend yourself. Your child needs you.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Remember what your child has been through. He doesn't mean everything he is saying; he's angry and dealing with so many difficult feelings.
- ▶ Support your child's feeling of anger, but gently redirect the anger towards the disaster. "You are really mad. Lots of bad things have happened. I'm mad too. I really wish it didn't happen, but even mommies and daddies can't make bad things not happen. It's so hard for both of us."

## If your child doesn't want to play or do anything

## If your child seems to not really have any feelings (happy or sad)

### Understand

- ▶ Your child needs you. So much has happened and he may be feeling sad and overwhelmed.
- ▶ When children are stressed, some yell and others shut down. Both need their loved ones.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Sit by your child and keep him close. Let him know you care.
- ▶ If you can, give words to his feelings. Let him know it's okay to feel sad, mad, or worried. "It seems like you don't want to do anything. I wonder if you are sad. It's okay to be sad. I will stay with you."
- ▶ Try to do things with your child, anything he might like (read a book, sing, play together).

## If your child cries a lot

### Understand

- ▶ Your family may have experienced difficult changes because of the disaster, and it is natural that your child is sad.
- ▶ When you let your child feel sad and provide her with comfort, you help your child even if she remains sad.
- ▶ If you have strong feelings of sadness, it may be good for you to get support. Your child's well-being is connected to your well-being.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Allow your child to express feelings of sadness.
- ▶ Help your child name her feelings and understand why she may feel that way. "I think you're sad. A lot of hard things have happened."
- ▶ Support your child by sitting with her and giving her extra attention. Spend special time together.
- ▶ Help your child feel hopeful about the future. Together think and talk about how your lives will continue and the good things you will do, like go for a walk, go to the park or zoo, play with friends.
- ▶ Take care of yourself.

## If your child misses people you are no longer able to see after the disaster

### Understand

- ▶ Even though young children do not always express how they feel, be aware that it is difficult for them when they lose contact with important people.
- ▶ If someone close to your child died, your child may show stronger reactions to the disaster.
- ▶ Young children do not understand death, and may think that the person can come back.

### Ways to help

- ▶ If possible, help your child stay in touch in some way (for example, sending pictures or cards, calling).
- ▶ Help your child talk about these important people. Even when we are apart from people, we can still have positive feelings about them by remembering and talking about them.
- ▶ Acknowledge how hard it is to not be able to see people we care for. It is sad.
- ▶ Where someone has died, answer your child's questions simply and honestly. When strong reactions last longer than two weeks, seek help from a professional.

## If your child misses things you have lost because of the disaster

### Understand

- ▶ When a disaster brings so much loss to a family and community, it is easy to lose sight of how much the loss of a toy or other important item (blanket) can mean to a child.
- ▶ Grieving for a toy is also your child's way of grieving for all you had before the disaster.

### Ways to help

- ▶ Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. It is sad that your child lost her toy or blanket.
- ▶ If possible, try to find something that would replace the toy or blanket that would be acceptable and satisfying to your child.
- ▶ Distract your child with other activities.

# Parent Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children after Disasters\*

## Reactions/Behavior: Helplessness and passivity

Young children know they can't protect themselves. In a disaster, they feel even more helpless. They want to know their parents will keep them safe. They might express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.

### Responses

- ▶ Provide comfort, rest, food, water, and opportunities for play and drawing.
- ▶ Provide ways to turn spontaneous drawing or playing from traumatic events to something that would make them feel safer or better.
- ▶ Reassure your child that you and other grownups will protect them.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Give your child more hugs, hand holding, or time in your lap.
- ▶ Make sure there is a special safe area for your child to play with proper supervision.
- ▶ In play, a four year old keeps having the blocks destroyed by fire. Asked, "Can you make it safe from the fire?" the child quickly builds a double block thick wall and says, "The fire won't get us now." A parent might respond with, "That wall sure is strong" and explain, "We're doing a lot of things to keep us safe."

## Reactions/Behavior: General fearfulness

Young children may become more afraid of being alone, being in the bathroom, going to sleep, or otherwise separated from parents. Children want to believe that their parents can protect them in all situations and that other grownups, such as teachers or police officers, are there to help them.

### Responses

- ▶ Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of your child.
- ▶ Help children regain confidence that you aren't leaving them and that you can protect them.
- ▶ Remind them that there are people working to keep families safe, and that your family can get more help if you need to.

\*© Brymer M, Jacobs A, Layne C, Pynoos R, Ruzek J, Steinberg A, Vernberg E, Watson P, (National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD), Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition. July, 2006. Available on: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) and [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov).

- ▶ If you leave, reassure your children you will be back. Tell them a realistic time in words they understand, and be back on time.
- ▶ Give your child ways to communicate their fears to you.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear.
- ▶ Say things such as, "We are safe from the fire now, and people are working hard to make sure we are okay."
- ▶ Say, "If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand. Then I'll know you need to tell me something."

## Reactions/Behavior: Confusion about the danger being over

Young children can overhear things from adults and older children, or see things on TV, or just imagine that it is happening all over again. They believe the danger is closer to where they live now, even if it happened further away.

### Responses

- ▶ Give simple, repeated explanations as needed, even every day. Make sure they understand the words you are using.
- ▶ Find out what other words or explanations they have heard and clarify inaccuracies.
- ▶ If you are at some distance from the danger, it is important to tell your child that the danger is not near you.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Continue to explain to your child that you are away from the danger.
- ▶ Draw, or show on a map, how far away you are from the disaster area, and that where you are is safe. "See? The disaster was way over there, and we're way over here in this safe place."

## Reactions/Behavior: Returning to earlier behaviors

Thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby-talk, needing to be in your lap

### Responses

- ▶ Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best as you can, as these earlier behaviors may continue a while after the disaster.

## Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ If your child starts bedwetting, change her clothes and linens without comment. Don't let anyone criticize or shame the child.

## Reactions/Behavior: Fears the disaster will return...

... when having reminders – seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing something that reminds them of the disaster.

## Responses

- ▶ Explain the difference between the event and reminders of the event.
- ▶ Protect children from things that will remind them as best as you can.

## Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "Even though a fire is burning in the fireplace, that doesn't mean our house is burning down again. The fire in the fireplace is under our control and it is much smaller."
- ▶ Keep your child from television, radio, and computer stories of the disaster that can trigger fears of it happening again.

## Reactions/Behavior: Not talking

Being silent or having difficulty saying what is bothering them

## Responses

- ▶ Put common feelings into words, such as anger, sadness, and worry about the safety of parents, friends, and siblings.
- ▶ Do not force them to talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time.

## Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Draw simple "happy faces" for different feelings on paper plates. Tell a brief story about each one, such as, "Remember when you saw the flames and you had a worried face like this?"
- ▶ Say something like, "Children can feel really sad when their home is damaged."
- ▶ Provide art or play materials to help them express themselves. Then use feeling words to check out how they felt. "This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the fire?"



## Reactions/Behavior: Sleep problems

Fear of being alone at night, sleeping alone, waking up afraid, having bad dreams

### Responses

- ▶ Reassure your child that he is safe. Spend extra quiet time together at bedtime.
- ▶ Let the child sleep with dim light on or sleep with you for a limited time.
- ▶ Some might need an explanation of the difference between dreams and real life.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Provide calming activities before bedtime. Tell a favorite story with a comforting theme.
- ▶ At bedtime say, "You can sleep with us tonight, but tomorrow you'll sleep in your own bed."
- ▶ "Bad dreams come from our thoughts inside about being scared, not from real things happening."

## Reactions/Behavior: Not understanding about death

Preschoolage children don't understand that death is not reversible. They have "magical thinking" and might believe their thoughts caused the death. The loss of a pet may be very hard on a child.

### Responses

- ▶ Give an age-appropriate consistent explanation – that does not give false hopes – about the reality of death.
- ▶ Don't minimize their feelings over a loss of a pet or a special toy.
- ▶ Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if he has any more questions.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Allow children to participate in cultural and religious grieving rituals.
- ▶ Help them find their own way to say goodbye by drawing a happy memory or lighting a candle or saying a prayer for the deceased.
- ▶ "No, grandpa won't be back, but we can think about him and talk about him and remember what a great grandpa he was."
- ▶ "Nobody could help grandpa. I know you miss him very much."

# Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after Disasters\*

## Reactions: Confusion about what happened

### Responses

- ▶ Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any misinformation that your child has about whether there is a present danger.
- ▶ Remind children that there are people working to keep families safe and that your family can get more help if needed.
- ▶ Let your children know what they can expect to happen next.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "I know other kids said that something terrible will happen again, but we are now in a safe place."
- ▶ Continue to answer questions your children have (without getting irritable) and to reassure them the family is safe.
- ▶ Tell them what's happening next.

## Reactions: Feelings of being responsible

School-age children may have concerns that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.

### Responses

- ▶ Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you.
- ▶ Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Take your child aside. Explain that, "After a disaster like this, lots of kids – and parents too – keep thinking, 'What could I have done differently?' or 'I should have been able to do something.' That doesn't mean they were at fault."
- ▶ „Nobody could help grandpa. It wasn't your fault."

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## Reactions: Fears of recurrence of the event and reactions to reminders

### Responses

- ▶ Help identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it.
- ▶ Reassure them, as often as they need, that they are safe.
- ▶ Protect children from seeing media coverage of the event, as it can trigger fears of the disaster happening again.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ When they recognize that they are being reminded, say, "Try to think to yourself, I am upset because I am being reminded of our house that has been destroyed when I read something about the disaster, but the house we live in now cannot be destroyed. I am in another country and I am safe."
- ▶ "I think we need to take a break from the Internet right now."
- ▶ Try to sit with your child while watching the news. Ask your child to describe what they saw on the news. Clarify any misunderstandings.

## Reactions: Retelling the event or playing out the event over and over

### Responses

- ▶ Permit the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let him know that this is normal.
- ▶ Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "You're drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that many children do that?"
- ▶ "It might help to draw about how people make peace with each other."

## Reactions: Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings

### Responses

- ▶ Provide a safe place for her to express her fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad; don't expect them to be brave or tough.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you're feeling better?"

## Reactions: Sleep problems

### Bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents

### Responses

- ▶ Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream.
- ▶ Temporary sleeping arrangements are okay; make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "That was a scary dream. Let's think about some good things you can dream about and I'll rub your back until you fall asleep."
- ▶ "You can stay in our bedroom for the next couple of nights. After that we will spend more time with you in your bed before you go to sleep. If you get scared again, we can talk about it."

## Reactions: Concerns about the safety of themselves and others

### Responses

- ▶ Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Create a "worry box" where children can write out their worries and place them in the box. Set a time to look these over, problem-solve, and come up with answers to the worries.

## Reactions: Altered behavior

### Unusually aggressive or restless behavior

#### Responses

- ▶ Encourage the child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration.

#### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "I know you didn't mean to slam that door. It must be hard to feel so angry."
- ▶ "How about if we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings."

## Reactions: Somatic complaints

### Headaches, stomachaches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason

#### Responses

- ▶ Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal.
- ▶ Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these non-medical complaints too much attention may increase them.

#### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise.
- ▶ "How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards."

## Reactions: Closely watching a parent's responses and recovery

Not wanting to disturb the parents with their own worries

### Responses

- ▶ Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings, as well as your own.
- ▶ Remain as calm as you can, so as not to increase your child's worries.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "Yes, my ankle is broken, but it feels better since the paramedics wrapped it. I bet it was scary seeing me hurt, wasn't it?"

## Reactions: Concern for other victims and families

### Responses

- ▶ Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden them with undue responsibility.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Help children identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g. looking after younger children).

# Parent Tips for Helping Adolescents after Disasters\*

## Reactions: Detachment, shame, and guilt

### Responses

- ▶ Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings.
- ▶ Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "Many teens – and adults – feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they could have done more. You're not at fault."

## Reactions: Self-consciousness

### About their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal

### Responses

- ▶ Help teens understand that these feelings are common.
- ▶ Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "I was feeling the same thing. Scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside."
- ▶ "My cell phone is working again, why don't you see if you can get a hold of Pete to see how he's doing."
- ▶ "And thanks for playing the game with your little sister. She's much better now."

\*© Brymer M, Jacobs A, Layne C, Pynoos R, Ruzek J, Steinberg A, Vernberg E, Watson P, (National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD), Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition. July, 2006. Available on: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) and [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov).

## Reactions: Acting out behavior

### Using alcohol and drugs, accident-prone behavior

#### Responses

- ▶ Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened.
- ▶ Limit access to alcohol and drugs.
- ▶ On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where they are going and what they are planning to do.

#### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "Many teens – and some adults – feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way – but it's not a good idea to act on it."
- ▶ "It's important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you." Assure them that this extra checking-in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.

## Reactions: Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders

#### Responses

- ▶ Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it.
- ▶ Explain to teens that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again.

#### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "When you're reminded, you might try saying to yourself, 'I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because there is no fire and I am safe.'"
- ▶ Suggest, "Watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. How about turning it off now?"



## Reactions: Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships

Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent's reactions in the crisis

### Responses

- ▶ Explain that the strain on relationships is expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during the recovery period.
- ▶ Encourage tolerance for different family members' courses of recovery.
- ▶ Accept responsibility for your own feelings.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Say, "You know, the fact that we're crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we've been through. I think we're handling things amazingly. It's a good thing we have each other."
- ▶ You might say, "I appreciate your being calm when your brother was screaming last night. I know he woke you up, too."
- ▶ "I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I am going to work harder to stay calm myself."

## Reactions: Radical changes in attitude

### Responses

- ▶ Explain that changes in people's attitudes after a disaster are common, but often return back over time.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ "We are all under great stress. When people's lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry – even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we all will feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."

## Reactions: Concern for other survivors and families

### Responses

- ▶ Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not let them burden themselves with undue responsibility.

### Examples of things to do and say

- ▶ Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g. doing the shopping).



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