



Guidance for Talking with Children & Teens after a Traumatic Event

Reaffirm Safety

What do your kids need right now to feel safe?

- First, it is important to let your children know they are safe NOW. Tell them this and reaffirm it verbally and emphasize all the safe places they have been in their life.

If your child has communication delays and may not understand these verbal statements, you can be sure they have their safety items such as a “blankie” or favorite animal and you can show pictures of themselves in a safe place like at the kitchen table, in your backyard or in their bed.

- Allow your child/teen to speak about their feelings and validate their reactions to the event. These feelings can range from being very big feelings, to feelings that appear to minimize what happened. Whatever their feelings are, recognize that right now this is their experience and reaction.

For non-verbal children, allow them to express what happened in whatever way they may do this, such as playing it out with toys or dolls.

- Be supportive of appropriate expression of their feelings and help them to put these feelings into perspective.
- If your child/teen is expressing their feelings in ways that are destructive or disruptive, try to re-direct them to use their words or other forms of expression like drawing, music, swinging or jumping on a trampoline to express how they feel.

Make time to talk

- It is important to give time for kids to share whatever they’re thinking about. Adults need to be proactive by setting aside some casual time each day for a check in rather than waiting for big feelings to come out. A few brief check ins over the course of a day will be better than setting aside a large chunk of time for one big/intense check in.

For children who do not use verbal language as a primary way of communicating be sure their augmentative communication (device, tablet, pictures, etc.) is nearby and has the available language to talk about such an event.

- Let the questions your child/teen asks guide the information you provide. Be patient and look for clues that your child/teen wants to talk.
- Younger children may prefer a more concrete activity (ex. imaginative play or sensory play such as sand and beans) and older children/teens may prefer listening to music or watching tv together, playing music, writing, drawing.
- Sometimes your child/teen may just want to sit and be in the same space as you, and that is okay.

Keep explanations developmentally appropriate

It is okay to share your feelings and don't be afraid to cry in front of your children. Hiding your emotions may send a message that it is not okay for them to share their feelings. Consider focusing on the positives, such as how well first responders handled what happened at the parade and how doctors and nurses at the hospitals were there to help people. Praise your child's bravery for how they acted and got to safety during the event. Encourage acts of kindness to others such as doing something nice for a neighbor or someone in the community. It is also okay to use distractions like watching a movie or playing.

Early elementary/pre-school

- Provide simple information in a balanced way. Talk to them, silence can be confusing. Reassure them, it is okay to tell your child they are safe, even if you don't feel that way right now. And it is also okay to tell them you do not have answers to all their questions.

Upper Elementary

- Answer questions and assist in separating reality from fantasy.

Middle School and High School

- Emphasize your teen's role in safety, how to access support, and how to give back. Kids this age often take comfort in contributing to others, encourage them to find a way to do something good, such as sending a card, writing a poem, dropping off lunch or something they have baked to first responders. Allow them to attend community vigils and events to find comfort with their peers. Find the right balance of exposure to media – a certain amount can be helpful to process the event, too much can be problematic and lead to rumination.

Help Kids Find Feelings of Safety

Our brains are pre-wired to have a strong negativity bias. To survive, animals, including humans, need to be on alert for threats. Neural connections for negative events in our environment, including emotional triggers that seem threatening, are created more quickly, with few learning trials, and are strongly ingrained.

It takes far more learning trials to create a positive connection in our brain than a negative one. This means a traumatic event only takes one learning trial to create a strong neural connection in the brain tied to feelings of threat or danger. This connection can be changed by having multiple experiences of positive associations and feelings of safety that have occurred both before the event in one's life as well as now in the aftermath.

In addition, a very normal response within our bodies and brains is for our entire nervous system to be aroused or activated by a traumatic event, and it can take a few days for the body and brain to come down from this aroused state.

Observe everyone's emotional state

Some children will not express themselves verbally but changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns can indicate anxiety or stress. Seek help from a mental health professional for those more intense and prolonged reactions.

Be observant for signs of acute stress disorder (less than a month after the event) or post-traumatic stress disorder (longer than a month after the event.) It is normal to have a few of these signs over the next couple of weeks. Research shows that 85-90% of people exposed to a traumatic event such as this will recover and return to typical functioning within a couple

of weeks because of their natural resiliency – only a small percentage will develop clinically significant symptoms that persist.

Signs of acute stress disorder:

- Recurring, uncontrollable, and intrusive distressing memories of the event
- Recurring distressing dreams of the event
- Feelings that the traumatic event is recurring—for example, in flashbacks
- Intense psychological or physical distress when reminded of the event.
- A persistent inability to experience positive emotions, such as happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings.
- Memory loss for an important part of the traumatic event
- Efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings associated with the event
- Efforts to avoid external reminders associated with the event, such as people, places, conversations, activities, and objects.
- Disturbed sleep
- Irritability or angry outbursts
- Excessive attention to the possibility of danger
- Difficulty concentrating
- An exaggerated response to loud noises, sudden movements, or other stimuli

Maintain a Typical Routine

Try to keep a regular schedule to assure and promote your child/teen's physical and mental well-being. Encourage your child to continue attending camp, summer school, or participating in their regular activities, but do not push if your child seems overwhelmed.

Review Safety Procedures

Make sure your child/teen is aware of your family's safety procedures – example where to go if separated at an event, having phone numbers for trustworthy family members or friends to call if they cannot reach you. Also check in with their camps, schools, places they spend a lot of time to make sure safety procedures have been reviewed with children/teens and they know what they are. Review safety procedures in the home.

Please seek help and communicate with supportive systems of care if needed. Remember you are not alone in managing complicated responses to events. We may all experience them differently, but we can also be part of the fabric of healing and support. Call JCFS Chicago at 855.275.5237 or email Ask@JCFS.org to learn more about our many programs and services and the ways we can help.