

## Helping Young Children Cope After Exposure to a Traumatic Event

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### Little Listeners: Helping Young Children Cope after Exposure to a Traumatic Event

Tragedies are especially distressing to families with young children. This resource is designed to help parents navigate this very challenging time.

The primary role of parents is to protect children. One important way to do this is to prevent their exposure to information they cannot handle. Young children do not need to be told about traumatic events that they have no way of understanding. So it is best to:

- Turn off TV and radio news reports; don't leave newspapers lying around.
- Ask friends and family not to discuss the scary event around your child.
- Maintain your child's regular routine.

#### Behaviors you might see in young children who have been exposed to a scary or traumatic event:

- Increased clinginess, crying and whining
- Greater fear of separation from parents
- Increase in aggressive behavior
- More withdrawn and harder to engage
- Play that acts out scary events
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- More easily frustrated and harder to comfort
- A return to earlier behaviors, like frequent night-wakening and thumb-sucking

#### What you can do:

- Respond to your child's need for increased attention, comfort and reassurance. This will make him feel safer sooner.
- Pay close attention to your child's feelings and validate them. Ignoring feelings does not make them go away.
- Help your child identify her feelings by naming them (scary, sad, angry, etc.).
- Offer your child safe ways to express feelings, such as drawing, pretend play, or telling stories.
- Don't discourage your child's play because you find it disturbing. Young children work through frightening events by reenacting them through play. If your child seems to be distressed by his play, comfort him and redirect him to another activity.

- Be patient and calm when your child is clingy, whiny, or aggressive. He needs you to help him regain control and feel safe.
- Answer children's questions according to their level of understanding: "Yes, a bad thing happened but we are keeping you safe."

**And critically:**

Tune in to your own feelings and get the support you need to cope. Managing your own emotions allows you to exude a sense of calm, and lets your child know that you are strong and in control, which is the most powerful way to let your child know she is safe.

**Additional Resources from ZERO TO THREE**

Below are links to additional resources created by ZERO TO THREE to support families after a disaster:

**[Little Listeners in an Uncertain World: Coping strategies for you and your young child after traumatic events](#)**

A short handout that provides additional tips and insights for parents with young children coping with disaster.

**[I'm Here For You Now](#)**

A children's board book designed to include your photos and provide reassurance that no matter what the circumstances, children will be loved, nurtured and protected.

**[Hope and Healing: A Caregiver's Guide to Helping Young Children Affected by Trauma](#)**

A book that prepares early care and education professionals to help children and families affected by trauma and stressful situations.

**[Federal Policy Recommendations: Hurricane Relief for Infants, Toddlers And Their Families](#)**

A factsheet created in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita outlining recommendations for federal response to support families with young children displaced by natural disaster that are still relevant today.