



## Commonly Experienced Responses to Traumatic Events among Children

### Children age 5 and under may react in a number of ways including:

- Showing signs of fear
- Clinging to parent or caregiver
- Crying, whimpering or trembling
- Moving around aimlessly
- Returning to behaviors common to being younger
- Thumb sucking
- Bedwetting
- Being afraid of the dark.

### Children age 6 to 11 may react by:

- Isolating themselves
- Becoming quiet around friends, family, and teachers
- Having nightmares or other sleep problems
- Refusing to go to bed
- Becoming irritable or disruptive
- Having outbursts of anger or starting conflicts
- Being unable to concentrate
- Refusing to go to school
- Complaining of physical problems
- Developing unfounded fears
- Expressing guilt over what happened.

### Adolescents age 12 to 17 may react by:

- Having nightmares or other sleep problems
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Using or abusing drugs, alcohol, or tobacco
- Being disruptive, disrespectful, or behaving destructively
- Having physical complaints
- Feeling isolated or confused
- Being depressed
- Being angry
- Losing interest in previously enjoyable activities.

**Adolescents may feel guilty of not preventing an incident, injury or deaths and may also have thoughts of revenge.**

## Reaction to Traumatic Events in Children and Youth

Reactions may be immediate or delayed and differ in severity prompting a wide range of possible behaviors and responses.

Frequently experienced responses include the loss of trust and a fear that the events may happen again.

Parents and caregivers play a vital role in helping children overcome these experiences and start the process of recovery. Parents should be aware that children with existing mental health problems, past traumatic experiences, and/or limited family and social supports may have more intense reactions.

Act on facts about what has happened, not speculation or rumors.

## How Do I Know If My Child Needs Professional Help?

- In general, professional support is a good idea if your child is having trouble coping or has strong reactive feelings or behaviors that won't go away and lasts longer than a few weeks.
- Professional support should be considered if reactions are interfering with normal functioning including symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a post-traumatic reaction.
- Pay attention to how your child or youth is reacting to events and please remember that support is just a telephone call away.





### What Can Parents or Caregivers Do To Help?

It's important to remember that children and youths' reactions to traumatic events are strongly influenced by adults' responses. After violence or community disaster, parents and family members should identify and address their own feelings — this will allow them to help others. Explain to children and youth what happened and let them know:

- You love them
- The event was not their fault
- You will do your best to take care of them
- It's okay for them to feel upset.

#### Do:

- Allow sadness and respect their need to cry
- Let children talk about feelings
- Let them write about feelings
- Let them draw pictures about the event or their feelings.

#### Don't:

- Expect children to be brave or tough
- Make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Get angry if children show strong emotions
- Get upset if they begin bedwetting, acting out, or thumb sucking.

#### Other tips:

- If children have trouble sleeping give them extra attention, let them sleep with a light on, or let them sleep in your room (for a short time).
- Try to keep normal routines, for example, reading bedtime stories, eating dinner together, watching TV together, reading books, exercising, or playing games. If you can't keep normal routines, make new ones together.
- Help children feel in control when possible by letting them choose meals, pick out clothes, or make some decisions for themselves.