

How Parents and Caregivers Can Help Children and Teenagers Cope with Fear

1. Pay close attention to separations from parents and loved ones: going and coming from school, parental departures for business travel, feeling lost in a large or unfamiliar public place. Even teens may become distressed and irritable if a parent is late picking them up or if they don't know their parents' whereabouts. Use frequent communications to reassure children that they have not been abandoned.
2. Be prepared to offer supports as children revisit old fears. "Would you like to sleep with the light on?" "You said that your tummy feels weird. Are you worried about something?" "Thunder is just a noise. It doesn't mean there will be a flood."
3. Listen for children's explanations so that you can detect how they are reassuring themselves. If there is nothing harmful in their rationales, support them.
4. Prepare children for common stress reactions to reduce their fears that they are "losing it." Sleep and appetite changes, inability to concentrate, intrusive thoughts, and other common reactions can overwhelm and isolate a child. As appropriate, let the child's peers know that these are common reactions and invite their assistance. "When she gets quiet and starts to drift off and think about the accident, we just try to get her talking again," said one helpful teen about her injured friend.
5. Imaginary play is helpful to children. Often children will re-enact a scary situation and "rewrite the ending" so they feel less vulnerable. Angry children may vent their rage on their stuffed animals or make-believe friends.
6. Factual information can bolster children's sense of well-being. "The reason Dad and I have check-ups is so we can find out if we need to take medicine for anything. We just had our check-ups and we are healthy." "The police would not let us go on this road if they thought the building would fall."
7. Help children identify their own coping skills. "You always find a way to make your little brother laugh. That is a good way to help him." "Playing baseball has always helped you get your mind off big problems." "Talking seems to help you figure out what to do when things are confusing and scary." "You have a special gift for figuring out how other people might be feeling."
8. Don't feel that every question must be answered. When horrific events take place, adults may feel they need to explain them. This is an undue burden. It is all right to say something like, "We are not sure why this happened. But people are doing everything to be sure it does not happen again."
9. Set limits on the details shared with children and teens, and limit their exposure to media coverage of the event.
10. Remind children how rare catastrophes are. "Most people would never do something like this." "A hurricane like this is so unusual."
11. Be hopeful, emphasizing opportunities to help others. Show children and teens how they can help in the aftermath. "Would you like to get some friends together to draw cards for the children in the hospital? "We can have a car wash to raise money for relief efforts."