

How Parents Can Help Children and Teens Cope With Shock And Surprise

1. When you can, plan daily activities ahead, telling the child when and how things will happen. “There will be a lot of grown-ups at our house. They are coming to tell us they feel sad, too. You should say hello to them, but then you can go back to playing video games.”
2. Stick with as many routines as possible, including times when the child can play and relax.
3. If routines must change, explain why (e.g., change in babysitter, location, or transportation). “I have to help the people who are looking for Daddy. That means that I am going to be home very late. You will stay at Aunt Jane’s. Uncle Frank will take you to your soccer practice after school. He knows to meet you at the school office.”
4. Use familiar objects to ease the transition to new surroundings (e.g., stuffed animal, blanket, and toys). “What do you want to take with you to the hospital?”
5. Anticipate any future surprises with the young person. “Our apartment is not going to look the same as before the flood. There will be a lot of mud and water. There will be broken windows and furniture. It might be scary at first to see it that way. But we will go there together. We may have to stay somewhere else until it is repaired.”
6. Role-play how the child or teen can respond to others’ reactions. “Kids at school may say bad things about the disaster. They may even blame grownups for not leaving in time. Let’s figure out what you can say if that happens.”
7. Identify visual and auditory signals that may cause the child to remember the incident. Help the child cope with these reminders. For example, school fire drills are likely to upset a teen traumatized by a fire. A child whose relative perished in a flood may be startled by the sound of thunder.
8. Whether you are a parent or professional, show children that you are still in charge. Young people of all ages need to know there are competent adults taking care of them. If you are not able to compose yourself and take on your normal supervisory role, get another adult to step in.
9. Be careful about sharing your own feelings of shock and surprise, especially with younger children. Identify private times when you can “debrief” with other adults.