

Tips for Helping Children Who Are Feeling Anxious

In General:

- ❑ Use short, clear sentences and speak as softly as you can. Children with learning and listening difficulties may become more distressed if they cannot keep up with what you are saying or if they think you are angry with them.
- ❑ ***Smile to show the children you like them.*** If the children don't know you, they may "read into" your facial expressions thoughts and feelings that are not accurate. They may think you are worried or angry and become more distressed. This is especially true for many children with special needs.
- ❑ Limit exposure to news coverage or to adult conversations about the frightening events. Pictures of the disaster can give children nightmares and can be hard for them to get out of their minds. Children who have learning problems or who are very young may be confused about what is real and what is not. They may confuse what has already happened with what is happening today. Television coverage can be hard for them to understand.
- ❑ Do not overwhelm the child with details about what has happened or what will happen, but be honest. If the child asks specific questions that you cannot answer in a reassuring way, say something like, "I am not sure. I wish I could tell you. But there are many grown-ups here to help you. We will keep you safe and dry. You will have food here and a place to sleep."
- ❑ Remember that children and teens who are anxious may not be sleeping very well. So, they may be cranky and irritable.
- ❑ If a child or teen comes to you with a bad dream or nightmare, encourage her/him to talk about the dream. Ask about feelings and fears. Then help them problem solve new ways to become more comfortable.
- ❑ Help children and teens relax for a few minutes with deep breathing. If, however, a child seems to be so anxious that she is having trouble catching her breathe, get help. You should always try to be calm.
- ❑ ***Listen carefully.*** Being a good listener is like being a good friend. Do not worry if you cannot understand everything the child or teen tells you. If the child seems to get more upset while telling you the story, suggest that "I want to hear more about that. What you are telling me is very important. But telling this story is hard for you. How about taking a little break from it and then telling me some more?"
- ❑ Don't assume that a child doesn't understand what is going on, or shouldn't be given general information about the events. Children will often "fill in the gaps" with fears or bigger worries. Just like adults, they like to have some information about what is happening. The information should be age appropriate and

encourage questions. The children's questions will let you know what they are thinking. Your answers will help them to integrate facts and reality into the fears.

- ❑ Maintain a calm, hopeful attitude. Let them see you think through situations calmly, ask others for help, and talk about feelings. They will imitate what they see.

With Young Children:

- ❑ Offer a stuffed animal, blanket, or anything familiar that gives comfort and is safe. (Avoid small items for those under age 3.) Ask the child to tell you about this possession. For example, "What is your teddy bear's name?"
- ❑ Tell a story about a child who was very scared but had grown-ups who helped. Or, tell a story about a time that you felt scared, and what you did about it.
- ❑ Suggest that the child close her/his eyes and imagine something pleasant (such as her/his family altogether in her/his living room watching a favorite television show, or a birthday party, or her/his school).
- ❑ Play a little game that will distract the child for a few minutes.
- ❑ If appropriate given your role, offer a hug or sit close to the child. Ask your supervisor whether you are permitted to hug the children you are taking care of.
- ❑ Encourage the child to express his fears and concerns through pictures, make-believe games or stories. If she/he is concerned about loved ones that may be missing, allow/encourage her/him to talk about them. Allow her/him to get her/his thoughts and feelings out before attempting to soothe the child.
- ❑ Make sure that the child knows it is okay to have fun, despite the concerns swirling around him. Encourage the child to laugh and to interact with others.

With Elementary-school Aged Children:

- ❑ Explain to the children that feeling sad and worried is normal in this situation. Let them know that they may have nightmares, or find themselves thinking about the events. Repeat that it is perfectly normal.
- ❑ Encourage them to talk to others, such as trusted adults or you. Let them know that talking about their experiences and feelings may be hard at first, but that is okay. Tell the children they can stop talking and start again later if they need to.
- ❑ Talk to them about the people who are there to help them and to talk to them when they have questions or want to talk about their feelings.
- ❑ Encourage the children to tell adults about the things they hear from other children to make sure they are getting the right information.
- ❑ Let them know that sometimes their mom/dad/caregiver/relative might be sad, and that it is normal for this important adult in their lives to cry.
- ❑ ***Give them hope.*** Talk about what they miss, but also help them to begin to plan what the future may look like for them.

- ❑ Give them small helping roles (for example, making birthday or get-well cards, helping pack care packages, or organizing games for younger children). This will allow them to feel part of the helping process. Let the children know that their suggestions and efforts are important and very helpful.
- ❑ Develop a consistent schedule. Begin to restore some sense of normalcy and routine in their lives. Write the new schedules down and talk to the children about the plans. Let them know (as best as you can) what to expect today, tomorrow and beyond. When there are changes, explain them and tell them when they will get back to the routine.
- ❑ Realize that some children who cannot express their feelings directly will show them as behavioral problems. Agitation, difficulty paying attention, disobedience, persistent questioning or looking for reassurance, aggression and temper tantrums may be signs that a child is struggling with emotions that he does not know how to express.

Help the child calm himself and talk about feelings in a general way. Don't be afraid to guess at what is bothering him, and give the child words for the feelings. For example, you may say the following: "I noticed that when the other kids were talking about feeling scared, you became jumpy and wanted to run around the room. I wonder if it is hard for you to think about being scared, or remembering when you were very frightened?"

With Teenagers:

- ❑ Touching or hugging teenagers can send a mixed message, especially if you are not someone they know. Unfamiliar physical contact can be a major problem with teenagers who have learning and emotional challenges. So, try to show that you care in other ways. For example, listen to them and let them know with your facial expressions that you are interested in what they have to say.
- ❑ Ask teenagers to write down the things they are worried about. Then talk about each area of concern and see if you can figure out some ways to help them manage that worry.
- ❑ Let the teenagers know that their parents/relatives may be preoccupied with other things, and they might have to take on extra responsibilities for a while. Encourage them to talk with their parents about this.
- ❑ Talk with them about how support systems may have changed as a result of the disaster, and how they can establish new relationships.
- ❑ Let them know that they may feel sad, angry, hopeless or overwhelmed as a result of all of the changes in their life and that this is normal. It is also normal to be angry at the cause of the hardship and to feel things are unfair. Encourage the teenagers to find positive outlets for their anger and resentment (for example, exercising, playing music, keeping a journal, drawing, and writing poetry).

- ❑ Help them to begin to re-establish a daily routine. Give them as many choices as possible, and let them feel that they have some control over what is happening. Let them know that it may be a while before things feel “normal” again.
- ❑ Let them know that they may have recurring thoughts of what happened or nightmares. Let them know that others around them may be feeling the same thing.
- ❑ Allow them to help out in any way possible. It will keep them busy, but also allow them to feel good about ‘giving back’.
- ❑ Let them know that some people feel better when they talk about their concerns, and others like to think about their concerns and fears alone. Allow them to decide which approach works best for them.