

Discussing Traumatic Events

WITH CHILDREN

Whether it is a school shooting, natural disaster, or death of a colleague, social workers are often part of the community affected by the crisis. After a traumatic or critical situation, many adults' natural instincts are to protect children from anything disturbing. Adults may avoid discussing information with children due to fear of saying something wrong. They may also avoid discussing difficult topics with children due to concern over being asked a question they are not equipped to answer. Parents, teachers, healthcare professionals and others often rely on social workers to communicate difficult or troubling information to children.

How information is communicated can impact the emotional well-being of the children. Trust and safety can be expressed when an adult who has a relationship with the children presents the information. Often this adult is a social worker, but if not, the social worker can collaborate with a trusted adult to present the information by leading the discussion or guiding the other adult through the conversation.

The following tips can help guide conversations when discussing traumatic events with children:

Quick Guide

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UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Gaining an understanding of what the children already know is key. An effective way to begin is by asking the children questions to assess how much the children know and their level of understanding about the situation. Asking questions also provides an opportunity to amend any incorrect or exaggerated information. The amount of detail provided should be guided by the children's developmental phases and emotional states.

STAY CALM, CLEAR AND CONCISE

The ability to remain calm during the conversation is crucial as children will likely absorb and mirror the emotion displayed by the facilitator. A calm and stable presentation will translate through the conversation and will help the children to feel the same way. If the social worker has charged emotions about the situation, it may be best to offer guidance to another appropriate professional to facilitate the discussion. Providing clear and concise information can minimize confusion and unnecessary worry for the children.

DISPLAY CONFIDENCE WHILE ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Many adults avoid discussing difficult topics with children because they anticipate not being able to provide "right" answers to the children's questions. If a child asks such a question, saying, "That is a good question. I am going to write that down and get back to you soon," can be an appropriate response. Follow up is essential in such an example and will show dedication. Also, responding by acknowledging the child's feelings behind the question can also provide support. For example, if a child asks, "Are the bad guys going to come back to get us?" a supportive response can focus on reassuring the children that they are safe and that all of the adults will work hard to protect them.

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BE STRENGTHS-BASED

When explaining traumatic situations to children, focus on the positive outcomes. Discussing how people helped, how the community bonded and safety increased can support children in feeling secure. A message that unfortunate things may happen, however good is always present, can assist children in making sense of the situation and learning valuable lessons.

PROVIDE GUIDANCE TO OTHERS

After discussing a traumatic situation with children, it is important to discuss the content and any concerns with other key adults who may have contact with the children to ensure continuity of support. When possible, having the key adults present for the conversation can be helpful.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

- » Empathize with their feelings.
- » Offer consistent support and comfort.
- » Provide extra attention.
- » Allow expression of feelings through art, play, storytelling, etc.
- » Keep routines, including discipline, in place when possible
- » Avoid overcompensating for hurt or scared feelings.
- » Limit exposure to adult conversations and media coverage.
- » Discuss how people help each other during difficult times.
- » Ask open ended questions.
- » Acknowledge behavior changes directly with children.
- » Follow up on feelings as time passes.