



Tips for Tots



Tip: Special Topic on Supporting Young Children through a School Tragedy

Strategies

Did you know?

Schools represent a safe place for young children. A tragedy within any one of our schools can have a far-reaching effect on *all* of them, and on all of our children. The impact upon young children can be particularly profound. Young children may respond in a variety of ways such as, withdrawal or clinginess, tantrums, crying, changes in sleep or appetite, and regression. They may startle more easily, and may have increased worries or fears. They may ask repeated questions about the event and act it out through play. Young children may wonder if this can happen to them. Their concrete thinking may cause them to make some connections to the event that is not logical. It is important to gauge their understanding and make gentle corrections as needed.

It is essential to respond during the aftermath of a tragedy in ways that help children feel safe. It is important for teachers to remember that they already possess the skills to do this and to support children through difficult times; Many of the things they provide each day, such as routines, familiarity and emotional connections, keep children feeling safe. How families and caregivers themselves react to traumatic events and their response to the needs of children in their care will directly impact a child's social emotional wellbeing. Therefore it is critical that caregivers first address their own responses to crisis and stress. They can do this by identifying their own support system, find the things that make them feel safe and focus on the positive, such as the many helpers in the community.

- Maintain daily routines, rules and expectations. Knowing what will happen next gives children a feeling of security and a sense that things can move towards what is normal.
- Be sure to notify children ahead of time of any changes to their day. Explain what these will be and why.
- Engage children in activities that will give them the needed distraction from the stressful events around them.
- Help children build on their strengths. Help them use coping skills they have learned in the past to help them get through this.
- Give children more opportunities for age appropriate control such as providing them with more choices. Provide them with opportunities to be helpers, such as helping in the classroom with clean up or a hurt peer or helping a community in need by letters, pictures, collections for needed items, etc.
- Reassure children often that they are safe. Share the types of things within the classroom and school that keep them safe, such as classroom rules, door locks, and fire drills. Remind them about the adults in their lives that keep them safe, such as parents, teachers, police, etc.
- Listen to children and allow them to express their anxieties and fears. Validate their feelings. Understand children will need to express themselves many times. Children may have a need to talk about the event. Monitor these conversations and answer any questions giving brief answers that are factual and reassure children they are safe. Gently correct any misinformation.
- When discussing the events with younger children, the amount of information shared should be limited to some basic facts. Use words familiar to them. Do not go into specific details about the event. Let parents know what has been discussed.
- Watch for anything in the environment that might trigger a child around the recent tragedy and cause the child distress. Talk children through this providing additional comfort. Ex. This is only a fire drill, we will walk to....You can hold my hand..
- Avoid adult conversation or media exposure about the tragic event while with young children.
- While some reactions and behaviors are to be expected, these should lessen over time through adult support and reassurance. Stay in close communication with families sharing any concerns. Depending on the severity or duration of the child's distress consider referring the family to professionals.

Resources:

A Terrible Thing Happened” Margaret M. Holmes
<http://www.covect.org/links-for-grieving-children/>
The Scared Child: Helping Kids Overcome Traumatic Events” John Wiley New York, New York

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