



## Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND TEACHERS

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*Adult support and reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time.*

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Children and youth can face emotional strains after a traumatic event such as a car crash or violence.<sup>1</sup> Disasters also may leave them with long-lasting harmful effects.<sup>2</sup> When children experience a trauma, watch it on TV, or overhear others discussing it, they can feel scared, confused, or anxious. Young people react to trauma differently than adults. Some may react right away; others may show signs that they are having a difficult time much later. As such, adults do not always know when a child needs help coping. This tip sheet will help parents, caregivers, and teachers learn some common reactions, respond in a helpful way, and know when to seek support.

### Possible Reactions to a Disaster or Traumatic Event

Many of the reactions noted below are normal when children and youth are handling the stress right after an event. If any of these behaviors lasts for more than 2 to 4 weeks, or if they suddenly appear later on, these children may need more help coping. Information about where to find help is in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

### PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

Very young children may go back to thumb sucking or wetting the bed at night after a trauma. They may fear strangers, darkness, or monsters. It is fairly common for preschool children to become clingy with a parent, caregiver, or teacher or to want to stay in a place where they feel safe. They may express the trauma repeatedly in their play or tell exaggerated stories about what happened. Some children's eating and sleeping habits may change. They also may have aches and pains that cannot be explained. Other symptoms to watch for are aggressive or withdrawn behavior, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and disobedience.

- **Infants and Toddlers, 0–2 years old,** cannot understand that a trauma is happening, but they know when their caregiver is upset. They may start to show the same emotions as their caregivers, or they may act differently, like crying for no reason, withdrawing from people, and not playing with their toys.
- **Children, 3–5 years old,** can understand the effects of trauma. They may have trouble adjusting to change and loss. They may depend on the adults around them to help them feel better.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Children and youth in these age ranges may have some of the same reactions to trauma as younger children. Often, younger children want much more attention from parents or caregivers. They may stop doing their school work or chores at home. Some youth may feel helpless and guilty because they cannot take on adult roles as their family or the community responds to a trauma or disaster.

- **Children, 6–10 years old**, may fear going to school and stop spending time with friends. They may have trouble paying attention and do poorly in school overall. Some may become aggressive for no clear reason. Or they may act younger than their age by asking to be fed or dressed by their parent or caregiver.
- **Youth and Adolescents, 11–19 years old**, go through a lot of physical and emotional changes because of their developmental stage. So, it may be even harder for them to cope with trauma. Older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine “I’m okay” or even silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Some may start arguments at home and/or at school, resisting any structure or authority. They also may engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs.

## How Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers Can Support Children’s Recovery

The good news is that children and youth are usually quite resilient. Most of the time they get back to feeling okay soon after a trauma. With the right support from the adults around them, they can thrive and recover. The most important ways to help are to make sure children feel connected, cared about, and loved.

- Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children express their emotions through conversation, writing, drawing, and singing. Most children want to talk about a trauma, so let them. Accept their feelings and tell them it is okay to feel sad, upset, or stressed. Crying is often a way to relieve stress and grief. **Pay attention and be a good listener.**
- Adults can ask the teens and youth they are caring for what they know about the event. What are they hearing in school or seeing on TV? Try to watch news coverage on TV or the Internet with them. And, limit access so they have time away from reminders about the trauma. Don’t let talking about the trauma take over the family or classroom discussion for long periods of time. **Allow them to ask questions.**
- Adults can help children and youth see the good that can come out of a trauma. Heroic actions, families and friends who help, and support from people in the community are examples. Children may better cope with a trauma or disaster by helping others. They can write caring letters to those who have been hurt or have lost their homes; they can send thank you notes to people who helped. **Encourage these kinds of activities.**
- If human violence or error caused an event, be careful not to blame a cultural, racial, or ethnic group, or persons with psychiatric disabilities. This may be a good opportunity to talk with children about discrimination and diversity. **Let children know that they are not to blame when bad things happen.**
- It’s okay for children and youth to see adults sad or crying, but try not to show intense emotions. Screaming and hitting or kicking furniture or walls can be scary for children. **Violence can further frighten children or lead to more trauma.<sup>3</sup>**
- Adults can show children and youth how to take care of themselves. If you are in good physical and emotional health, you are more likely to be readily available to support the children you care about. **Model self-care, set routines, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep, exercise, and take deep breaths to handle stress.**

## Tips for Talking With Children and Youth of Different Age Groups After a Disaster or Traumatic Event

### PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

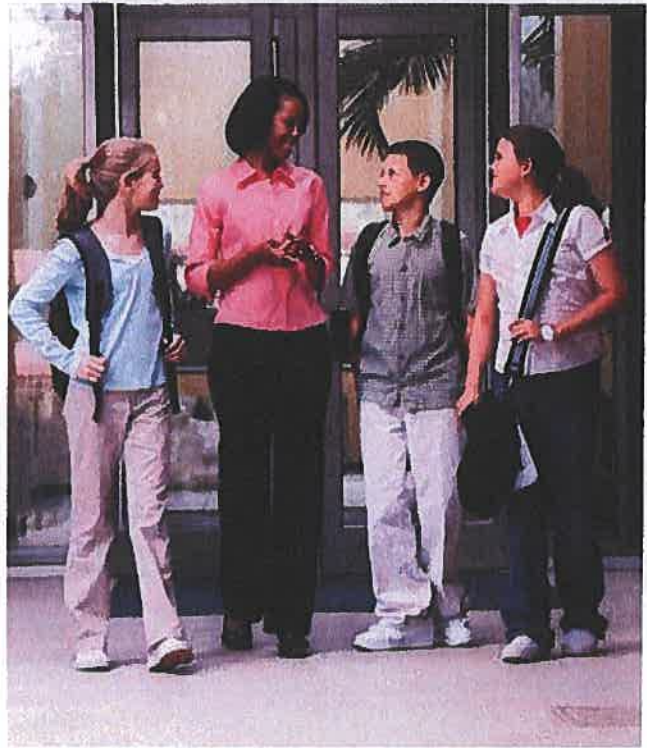
Give these very young children a lot of cuddling and verbal support:

- Take a deep breath before holding or picking them up, and focus on them, not the trauma.
- Get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using words they can understand.
- Tell them that you still care for them and will continue to take care of them so they feel safe.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Nurture children and youth in this age group:

- Ask your child or the children in your care what worries them and what might help them cope.
- Offer comfort with gentle words, a hug when appropriate, or just your presence.
- Spend more time with the children than usual, even for a short while. Returning to school activities and getting back to routines at home is important too.
- Excuse traumatized children from chores for a day or two. After that, make sure they have age-appropriate tasks and can participate in a way that makes them feel useful.
- Support children spending time with friends or having quiet time to write or create art.
- Encourage children to participate in recreational activities so they can move around and play with others.



- Address your own trauma in a healthy way. Avoid hitting, isolating, abandoning, or making fun of children.
- Let children know that you care about them—spend time doing something special with them, and make sure to check on them in a nonintrusive way.

**A NOTE OF CAUTION:** *Be careful not to pressure children to talk about a trauma or join in expressive activities. While most children will easily talk about what happened, some may become frightened. Some may even get traumatized again by talking about it, listening to others talk about it, or looking at drawings of the event. Allow children to remove themselves from these activities, and monitor them for signs of distress.*

## Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)  
Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515  
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

### Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator  
Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)  
TDD: 1-866-889-2647  
Website: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator>

MentalHealth.gov  
Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>  
*MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.*

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator  
Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)  
(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889  
Website: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

### Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline  
Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)  
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)  
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>  
*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

Disaster Distress Helpline  
Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746  
Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

Child Welfare Information Gateway  
Toll-Free: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)  
Website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/how.cfm>

### Additional Behavioral Health Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/traumaJustice>  
*This behavioral health resource can be accessed by visiting the SAMHSA website and then selecting the related link.*

Administration for Children and Families  
Website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

## When Children, Youth, Parents, Caregivers, or Teachers Need More Help

In some instances, a child and his or her family may have trouble getting past a trauma. Parents or caregivers may be afraid to leave a child alone. Teachers may see that a student is upset or seems different. It may be helpful for everyone to work together. Consider talking with a mental health professional to help identify the areas of difficulty. Together, everyone can decide how to help and learn from each other. If a child has lost a loved one, consider working with someone who knows how to support children who are grieving.<sup>4</sup> Find a caring professional in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (n.d.). Traffic safety facts, 2003 data: Children. (DOT HS 809 762). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved from <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/809762.pdf>.

<sup>2,4</sup> National Commission on Children and Disasters. (2010). National Commission on Children and Disasters: 2010 report to the President and Congress. (AHRQ Publication No. 10-MO37). Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <http://archive.ahrq.gov/prep/nccdreport/nccdreport.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Children's Bureau. (2010). Child maltreatment 2009. Washington, DC: Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2009>.



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## AFTER A CRISIS: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN HEAL

Young children, toddlers, and preschoolers know when bad things happen, and they remember what they have been through. After a scary event, we often see changes in their behavior. They may cry more, become clingy and not want us to leave, have temper tantrums, hit others, have problems sleeping, become afraid of things that didn't bother them before, and lose skills they previously mastered. Changes like these are a sign that they need help. Here are some ways you can help them.

### S SAFETY FIRST—YOUR YOUNG CHILD FEELS SAFE WHEN YOU

- Hold your child or let them stay close to you.
- Tell your child you will take care of them when things are scary or difficult. With children who are learning to talk, use simple words, like saying "Daddy's here."
- Keep them away from frightening TV images and scary conversations.
- Do familiar things, like singing a song you both like or telling a story.
- Let them know what will happen next (to the degree that you know).
- Have a predictable routine, at least for bedtime: a story, a prayer, cuddle time.
- Leave them with familiar people when you have to be away.
- Tell them where you are going and when you will come back.

### A ALLOW EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS

- Young children often "behave badly" when they are worried or scared. Children can "act out" as a way of asking for help. Remember! Difficult feelings = Difficult behavior.
- Help your child name how they feel: "scared," "happy," "angry," "sad." Tell them it's OK to feel that way.
- Show your child the right way to behave, like saying "It's OK to be angry but it's not OK to hit me."
- Help your child express anger in ways that won't hurt, using words, play, or drawings.
- Talk about the things that are going well to help you and your child feel good.

### F FOLLOW YOUR CHILD'S LEAD

- Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need to be held.
- Listen to your child and watch their behavior to figure out what they need.

### E ENABLE YOUR CHILD TO TELL THE STORY OF WHAT HAPPENED DURING & AFTER

- Having a story helps your child make sense of what happened and cope better with it.
- Children use play to tell their story. For example, they may make popping sounds to show what they experienced. They may hide in the closest to show what it was like to shelter-in-place.
- Join your child in showing and telling not only what happened, step by step, but also how you both felt.
- As you tell the story, follow your child's lead. When the story is difficult, your young child may need breaks: running around, being held, playing something else. This is OK. They will come back to the story when they are ready.
- It can be hard to watch your children's play or listen to their stories of what happened. Get support if it is too hard for you to listen without becoming upset.

### T TIES—RECONNECT WITH SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE, COMMUNITY, CULTURE & RITUALS

- Simple things like a familiar bedtime story, a song, a prayer, or family traditions remind you and your child of your way of life and offer hope.
- If you belong to a group, like a church, try to find ways of reconnecting with them.
- You can help your child best when you take care of yourself. Get support from others when you need it.

### Y YOUR CHILD NEEDS YOU

- Reassure your child that you will be together.
- It is common for children to be clingy and worried about being away from you.
- Just being with your child, even when you can't fix things, helps your child.
- If you need to leave your child, let them know for how long and when you are coming back. If possible, leave something that belongs to you, or a picture that your child can have.

## MHMRABV Resources and Referrals

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### **Medical**

#### **Health for All**

979-774-4176

3030 E 29<sup>th</sup> St., Suite 111, Bryan TX 77802

*Variety of medical services and counseling*

#### **HealthPoint- Bryan (Brazos)**

979-595-1700

3370 S. Texas Ave. Suite B, Bryan TX 77802

*All HealthPoint locations accept: Medicaid/  
Medicare, Sliding Scale, Medical,  
Dental, private insurance*

#### **HealthPoint- Navasota (Grimes)**

936-825-0000

1905 Dove Crossing, Navasota TX 77868

#### **HealthPoint- Madisonville (Madison)**

936-348-3418

100 W Cross St., Madisonville TX 77864

#### **HealthPoint- Somerville (Burleson)**

979-596-1441

600 Memory Ln., Somerville TX 77879

#### **HealthPoint- Caldwell (Burleson)**

979-567-7080

1103 Woodson Dr., Caldwell TX 77836

#### **HealthPoint- Centerville (Leon)**

903-536-3687

607 Lassiter Rd., Centerville TX 75833

#### **HealthPoint- Hearne (Robertson)**

979-279-3451

1002 West Brown St., Hearne TX 77859

#### **Baylor S&W Brenham Clinic (Washington)**

979-337-5800

600 N. Park St., Brenham TX 77833

*Takes Medicare and some Medicaid*

#### **Medical Assistance Program (Washington)**

979-836-1740

1016 E. Horton St., Brenham TX 77833

*Public Health Dept., No insurance, receive help  
with getting Medication*

#### **Blinn College Dental Office**

979-209-7283(English) /979-209-7272(Spanish)

301 Post Office St., Bryan TX 77802

#### **Brazos County Health Department**

979-361-4440

201 N. Texas Ave., Bryan Texas 77803

*No insurance, except for Medicaid for children  
under 18 years of age.*

#### **Brazos County Indigent Health Care**

##### **Program**

979-595-2800

3991 E. 29th St., Bryan TX 77802

#### **Hope Pregnancy Center**

979-695-9193

205 E. Brentwood Dr., College Station TX  
77840

*Free sexual health services/counseling and  
parent education classes*

#### **Texas A&M Physicians Family Medicine**

979-776-8440

2900 E 29<sup>th</sup> St., Bryan TX 77802

*Private pay, Medicare, Medicaid, slide scale*

#### **Hospice Brazos Valley**

979-821-2266

502 W 26<sup>th</sup> St., Bryan TX 77803

*Non-profit, services free of charge, if client  
meets the right qualifications*

### **Psychiatry**

#### **Everhealth**

979-383-2074

307 S. Main St., Ste 103 Bryan TX 77804

*Adults, minors, Medicare and Medicaid*

#### **Dr. Mahesh Dave**

979-776-5600

1201D Briarcrest Dr., Bryan TX 77802

*Medicare, private insurance and Private Pay*

#### **Scott and White Psychiatry**

979-691-3397

300 Briarcrest Dr., Floor 4, Bryan TX 77802

*No Medicaid, some types of Medicare, private  
insurance*

# MHMRABV Resources and Referrals

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## **Texas A&M Physicians Psychiatry and Behavioral Health**

979-774-8200  
8441 Riverside Parkway, Clinical Building 1,  
Ste: 1400, Bryan TX 77807  
*Medicare, Medicaid, and Sliding Scale*

## **Washington County Behavioral Health**

281-217-5277  
902 S. Austin St., Brenham TX 77833  
*No Medicare or Medicaid. Online  
Telepsychiatry/ medication management. Self-  
Pay and Private insurance accepted.*

## **Counseling and Therapy**

### **Aggieland Autism Center**

979-412-1423  
3792 High Lonesome  
College Station, TX 77845  
**Applied Behavior Analysis**

### **Center to Rise Wellness Spa Studio**

817-987-2651  
1306 Beck St.. Bryan TX  
*Private insurance, Medicaid*

### **Empower Behavioral Health**

979-985-9503  
700 University Drive E Ste 106  
College Station, TX 77840  
**Applied Behavior Analysis**

### **STAR Program (Twin City Mission)**

979-260-7336  
3806 Old College Rd., Bryan TX 77801  
*Free counseling and case management for  
families with minor children (under 18yrs old)  
in all counties.*

### **Blinn College- Mental Health Counseling**

979-209-7251  
*Free counseling for Blinn Students*

### **Domestic Violence Services (Twin City Mission)**

979-775-2255 / 979-775-5355 (24hr hotline)  
101 Waverly Dr., Bryan TX 77801  
*Free Counseling and case management for  
abuse survivors.*

## **Texas A&M Counseling and Assessment Clinic**

979-595-1770  
3370 S. Texas Ave., Bryan TX 77802  
*Sliding Scale and Spanish Available*

## **Texas A&M Psychology Clinic**

979-845-8017  
4258 TAMU, College Station TX 77843  
*Spanish Available, No Medicaid, Pay out of  
pocket.*

## **Associates for Applied Psychology**

979-268-1111  
408 Tarrow St., College Station TX 77840  
*Spanish Available*

## **Lamb Behavioral Health Center, LLC –**

979-436-1956  
1737 Briarcrest Dr., Suite 24  
Bryan, TX 77802  
*Children/Adolescents/College  
students/Developmental disabilities, private  
insurance and medicaid*

## **Emerging Path Counseling**

979-906-1708  
1920 W. Villa Maria STE. 303, Bryan TX  
77807  
*Child/adolescent/ adult, Sliding scale, Private  
insurance*

## **Easter Seals Greater Houston**

346-330-3859  
4888 Loop Central Drive, #200,  
Houston, TX 77081  
*Counseling for Veteran & Military-Connected  
Family*

## **The Counseling Center**

979-776-0930  
1713 Broadmoor Drive, Bldg. 4, Suite 406,  
Bryan, TX 77802  
*Adults, Most Insurances, Private pay*

## **A&M Christian Counseling Center**

979-703-1808  
2490 Booneville Rd., Ste 210 Bryan TX 77808