

Children and Trauma

In the wake of catastrophes and recent news reports, it may be difficult to avoid exposing your family to traumatic events. Children and even teens may have varied reactions to what they have experienced “second hand” through media and alternative sources of information. While it is comforting to know that they have not experienced these events first hand, it is important to be aware that even second hand experiences can lead to difficulties in their relationships and behavior at home and school. Below are some guidelines from the American Psychological Association on possible reactions to trauma and steps parents can take to help alleviate the intensity of reactions:

Possible Reactions to Trauma

- Feelings of anxiety, fears, and worries about safety of self or others (in younger children this may be exhibited by being more clingy to teacher or parent)
- Worries about re-occurrence of traumatic event
- Increase in irritability, mood instability
- Changes in behavior (including sleep, appetite, and lack of interest in usual activities)
- Increased somatic complaints
- Changes in school performance
- Statements about death and dying
- Repeated discussions or play scenarios of event

What Parents can do to Help

- Avoid exposing your child to reminders of the trauma. This includes limiting your child's exposure to the news and other programs about the tragedy.
- If your child is exposed to media coverage of the trauma try to watch it with them and/or talk to your child to clarify any miscommunication.
- Limit adult conversation about the events – even when you think they are not listening they often are.
- Maintain family routines
- Avoid unnecessary separations from important caregivers
- Provide soothing activities such as reading books, listening to music, riding bikes
- Address acting-out behavior involving aggression or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly with limit setting. If this behavior is severe or persists seek professional help.
- Increase patience with your child and yourself.

For more information on children and trauma contact:

American Psychological Association at www.apa.org or (202) 336-5800

SAMHSA at www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov