

ABC's of Caring for Children

Age Appropriate: Children respond differently at different ages. What is appropriate for a toddler would certainly not be appropriate for an adolescent. Therefore, you should individualize your responses to each child according to her age. An adolescent may cope by being involved with her peer group – for example, scouts, candy-stripers, etc. – but a younger child would obviously not have these support systems and will need your individual attention. Talk at her level. Avoid technical terms a young child would not understand. Do not use very simple words with teenagers since they may view this as patronizing and possibly even insulting.

Balance: A key principle of stress management, and for living one's life in general, is balance. Extremes can be distressful and even dangerous. Everything in moderation is a good rule. For example, you do not have to eliminate your child's TV watching. It is okay for an older child or adolescent to watch TV news or other programs about the disaster. However, put some limit on the amount of time your child spends watching these programs. Watch the TV news with him, discuss it, and then engage him in other activities.

Care for Yourself: Several studies have demonstrated that a child's distress level frequently mirrors her parents'. Therefore, caring for yourself is the first and foremost way of helping your child. [See Chapter 8 – “Help Yourself” – p. 141.] By getting your distress under control, you serve as a role model for your child. Your behavior shapes your child's behavior.

Dreams: Teach your child that dreams are not mysterious. You should say, “It is only a dream. It is not real, but it can mean something to you.” There is even a study that demonstrates that individuals may be able to control and change the content of their dreams. Talk with your child about his dreams, if he feels comfortable about revealing them to you. An older child can study his dreams and learn their personal meaning. This can help him put the ordeal into perspective.

Emotion and Empathy: Feelings are okay. They are natural. Feelings are genuine. Although what we might feel may be out of proportion to a particular situation, it is still how we feel. You may not agree with how your child feels about what has happened because you feel differently about it. Although you may not agree with your child's feelings, you can empathize, by imagining her point of view. Be sure to respect her feelings. Do not attempt to talk her out of her feelings.

Facilitate: As an adult, you have abilities that your child might not have. Therefore, a major role for you is to facilitate what is necessary for your child to cope. For example, if your young child expresses the need to raise funds for the disaster victims, make it a project for both of you so that you may guide him. If your adolescent wishes to volunteer his services, call a co-worker whom you know volunteers for a disaster relief organization, and arrange for your child to meet with him.

Gifts: A gift is doing something special without needing to be asked. Even though you regularly give to your children, this is an especially significant time to give. Your gift might be to go on that day trip you were planning together but have been too busy to do. Your gift could be doing what she really likes, even if you do not enjoy it. For example, see a children's movie.

Hugging and Holding: These need no explanation.

Individualize: “One size does not fit all.” Each child may need something different because of his personality and temperament. There is more than one way to react and cope with tragedy and trauma. One child may cope best by maintaining some solitude; another child by being socially involved.

Join Together: Spend more time with your child. Doing family activities, especially at a time of tragedy and trauma, is very supportive and reassuring.

Kindness: Show your kindness to others, especially those in need among your neighbors. Children learn by example. This is the time to be especially kind.

Love: The lyrics of the Beatles song state, “All you need is love, love, love is all you need.” Demonstrate and express your love for your children.

Meaning: There are two “meanings” in regard to experiencing trauma. The first is the specific meaning the trauma takes on for the individual. This is usually the answer she seeks to such questions as, “Why me?” or “Why did this happen?” “What can I learn from this to improve my life?” There is a larger meaning that has to do with one’s life viewpoint and beliefs. This meaning exists before one is exposed to the trauma and shapes how one answers the questions previously stated. This meaning involves one’s culture and religion. It relates to spirituality. When faced with tragedy and trauma, affirming the family’s shared values or religious beliefs provides comfort and hope.

Normal Reactions: Most reactions are natural and temporary. A very young child may regress, that is, go back to former behavior. For example, a toddler may return to thumbsucking or lose bladder and/or bowel control after having been toilet trained. A latency age child (6 through 11 years) may bed-wet or cling excessively. Avoid over-reacting to or punishing your child for these behaviors. Give your child extra attention and care. Help him to regain his most appropriate behavior. An adolescent, for example, may withdraw or become irritable. Show him you care by helping him “weather the storm.” “Normalization” is the act of reassuring another that his behavior, thoughts, or feelings are natural or normal reactions to a situation. For example, to “normalize” your 16-year-old’s reactions, you might say, “I can see why you’re out of synch, but please don’t take it out on me.” For your 10-year-old, you might offer, “It’s okay to be sad. I’m sad too.”

Observe: Watch your child’s behavior to reassure yourself that she is having a normal reaction to a traumatic event, or to detect warning signs of difficulty. Intense and/or persistent reactions should be professionally evaluated. Intervene and get help if there is use of alcohol or drugs. If you have any question or concern about your child’s reaction, consult an appropriate health or mental health professional.

Process and Play: Reacting to and recovering from a disaster is a process. Do not expect everything to immediately return to “normal.” Play, for a younger child, is a way to process his experience and relieve tension. It also helps a child gain mastery over an otherwise over-helming event. For example, in reacting to the attack on the World Trade Center, a young child may have needed to repeatedly build two tall towers out of blocks, only to angrily “knock them down.” Allow your child to process the disaster. Such behavior may make you uneasy, but do not stop it, although you need to intervene if his behavior becomes genuinely destructive.

Questions and Respect: Encourage your child to ask questions. Do not bar questions or change the topic when she asks a question. You may also ask questions, but do not interrogate your child. Make

yourself available. Listen, listen, listen! This allows your child to express her thoughts and feelings, and process her experience. Remember to use the principle of “balance.” There is a time to ask questions, a time to encourage your child to talk about her experience, and a time to respect her silence.

Routine and Ritual: Children need structure and support. Therefore, maintain your regular routines and schedules as much as possible. Try to continue to observe your family rituals, such as birthday celebrations, annual barbecues, or religious observances.

Safety and Security: A major task for you is to keep your child safe and secure. **[Follow the safety and security procedures in Chapter 3 – “Prevent” – p. 29.]**

Talking, Truth and Timing: Talk to children truthfully. You may wish to use the opportunity of a disaster to teach your child some truths about life. Parents are protectors of their children. When a child is young, you can hold his hand to prevent him from running into danger. When he is older, you cannot constantly guard him or physically rescue him from every threat. You can only hope that he will use what you have taught him to protect himself.

We often automatically utter statements that might not be true. For example, “Everything will be all right” is a lie unless you are positive that it will. “There is nothing to worry about” is a lie if there is something to worry about. Children can often sense that there is something wrong or that you are upset. They just might not know what is wrong or what is upsetting you. Therefore, it will only distress your child if you falsely reassure her. In addition, she will likely learn from another source what you have withheld. Isn’t it better to have her learn the truth from you, so that you can be emotionally supportive and give her guidance?

You can be informative and truthful without “letting it all hang out.” You do not have to blurt out all the horrible details. You can often say things in a way that is reassuring and hopeful.

Timing is important. For example, a good method to convey “bad news” to anyone is to do it in small doses over time, if possible. This allows the person to adjust rather than to be shocked. How do you know when it might be a good time to give your child information? Your child’s asking you a question is one indication of the correct time. Nevertheless, it is best that you only answer the question he is asking so that you do not overwhelm him with too much information. You may ask questions to clarify what your child is really seeking. Remember to give age-appropriate answers. Express your feelings if you are comfortable doing so. Hearing that “mommy and daddy are sad” but seeing that they are still functioning sets an excellent example. Such behavior is normalizing. Talking truthfully to your child also gives her an opportunity to express her thoughts and feelings.

Understand: To take care of children, it helps if you understand them, that is, be thoroughly familiar with their makeup, with “what makes them tick.” Learn the normal behavior that children exhibit at various stages of development. Learn the natural responses children might have to trauma. **[See the table –“Children’s Reactions To Disasters” – in Chapter 5, p. 100.]**

Know your child’s individual characteristics. What is he usually like? How does he behave when he is ill? What motivates him? What are his interests? Is he a quiet person or a talker? Etc., Etc., Etc. You can use this knowledge to help your child prior to, during, and in the aftermath of a disaster.

Validate: In interpersonal relations there are two types of validating. The first type is a process of testing if your assumptions are correct. If you make an assumption about what a person might be feeling or thinking, you should confirm your hunch. You can do this by saying, “You look worried to me. Are you?” or “If this happened to me, I would be thinking Is this what you are thinking?” The second type of validation is the act of acknowledging what another person is feeling. If what your child is feeling is obvious, you might say, for example, “I hear how sad you are,” or “You are angry.” You may use both of these types of validation to help your child.

Work: Freud’s definition of psychological health is the ability “to love and to work.” Work is basic to our emotional well-being. Unless it is not possible, you should set an example by continuing to go to work. Work does not only mean performing at a job. For example, you can also work on a home project with your child.

eXercise: Physical activity breaks the tension. Regular exercise promotes a “sound mind in a sound body,” because exercise benefits our brains as well as our bodies. Exercise is an activity that you and your child can do together.

You: Yes, you! You are vital to your child’s well-being. Therefore, take care of yourself. Didn’t we say this already? Yes! We did. We said, “Care for yourself.” But, it is so important, we are saying it again. An important ingredient for good parenting is tolerating your emotional turmoil – especially anxiety – for the sake of your child. For example, you may have to tolerate being separated from your child while she is at school or an evacuation center during a disaster. Although being reunited with your child will relieve your anxiety, your child will become distressed upon seeing you in a severely agitated state. Therefore, it would better if you take some time and avoid rushing to her side until you get your own distress and aroused behavior under control.

Zebras: Zebras? Yes! Zebras! Think of Disney cartoons with appealing animals. How do they make you feel? Sometimes it helps to be silly, especially with younger children. It breaks the tension.