

Children and Responses to Crisis

Parent Handout

Prepared by Student Services Committee

Background – Crises can occur in many forms. These may include:

- sudden military deployment
- death of a loved one
- weather-related, as in tornadoes, hurricanes or floods.
- accident-related, as in bus or automobile deaths due to illness
- bizarre and unusual, as in the case of snipers or a murder

The emotional effects of a crisis on you and your child can be tremendous. One of the difficulties experienced by parents during crises is that they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact of the crisis on their child. This handout is designed to help you and your child during a crisis.

Emotional Reactions to Crisis

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from child to child. Children's reactions to a crisis are determined by their previous experiences, their temperament and personality and the immediacy of the crisis to their own lives. Nonetheless, some commonalities exist in how children (and adults) feel when their lives are disrupted by a crisis.

Loss of Control -- By their very nature, crises are something over which we have no control – if we did, we would stop them from happening. The feeling of loss of control can be overwhelming.

Loss of Stability -- Crises also interrupt the natural order of things. Stability is gone and this is very threatening; it can destroy trust and upset equilibrium for extended periods. After all, if this crisis could happen, then most anything else might happen, too.

Self-Centered Reactions – Children's immediate reaction to crisis often includes a fear for their own safety and well being. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them, to an extent that you think is unreasonable. However, young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and the outcome of the crisis as it relates to them.

Stages of Reactions to Loss – Some reactions to crisis are similar to reactions to other losses or grief. These include denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. Not every person experiences all of these feelings, and they do not always occur in just this order. A person may feel angry, then depressed, and then angry again. How feelings are expressed will vary with the age of the child. A very young child may express denial by refusing to talk about the situation or by clowning when others are talking about the crisis. Older children may go to their rooms or insist on going to the mall. Anger in a young child may involve a tantrum and in an older child may be manifested as yelling at a parent.

What to Say to a Child During or After a Crisis:

- Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug and saying, "This is really hard for us, " will always work.
- Let the child know that it's okay to be worried or afraid, and give the child a reason for why his / her parent is in the Middle East. "I bet you're worried about your Daddy's (Mommy's) safety. Daddy (Mommy) had to go because his / her job is to protect our country."

- Try to recognize the feeling underlying your child's actions and put it into words. Saying something like, "It makes us mad to think about all the people and homes that were hurt by this hurricane," or "I can see that you are feeling really sad about this," can help.
- Sometimes children may have overwhelming fear that they are unable to put into words, and you may need to voice for them. For instance, if a friend loses his mother during a flood, you might want to say to your child, "You may be scared that something will happen to me and Daddy (or Mommy), too. We are safe, and the flood waters are leaving, so we aren't going to die from this flood."
- Be honest with your child about what has happened and what is happening.
- Don't deny the seriousness of the situation. Saying to a child, "Don't cry. Everything will be okay," does not reflect how the child feels and the child knows that, at least in the immediate future, this is not true.
- Help your child know what words to use with others. For instance, if the crisis has resulted in death, the child may feel overwhelmed about what to say to friends at the funeral home. You may need to help by suggesting some simple, appropriate words.

- **Things To Do With A Child After A Crisis:**
 - Allow your child to remain a child. Don't expect him (her) to assume a parenting role.
 - Let your child be near you as much as s/he wants, and when this is not possible, find someone else with whom the child feels secure and make it clear to the child that this person will take care of him / her until you return.
 - If you have to leave, you may need to reassure your child that you will return. If the crisis has involved loss of lives or homes, even when the real threat is past, it may take some time for your child to feel secure when separated from you. This is a very normal reaction and should lessen over time.
 - Prepare for difficulties with your child at night.
 - If possible, take the time to reestablish usual bedtime routines, such as story time; this can provide a sense of security.
 - You may need to sit near your child until s/he falls asleep for a few nights. Gradually withdraw this support by saying that you will check back in two minutes and continue lengthening this time until your child feels secure again.
 - If possible, you may want to ensure that your child has his / her special stuffed animal or usual pillow if you have to sleep in a strange place.
 - For a while, a light may need to be left on in or near your child's room.
 - Siblings may want to sleep in the same room until they feel more secure again.
 - Expect that resolving all of the feelings related to the crisis may take your child (and you) quite a while.
 - It is normal for a child to bring up the crisis long after it has happened and often when you least expect it.
 - Make sure your child's reactions are not more severe than that of other children. If you believe your child's reaction is extreme, seek professional assistance. Your social worker, school counselor or school psychologist can assist or provide names of other professionals trained to deal with children. Signs of reactions that are extreme and need professional attention include:
 - persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections, dream, flashbacks or hallucinations.
 - persistent avoidance of objects or diminished interest usual activities
 - extreme withdrawal
 - continual weeping or crying
 - signs of increased arousal, such as sleep difficulties, irritability, disturbances in concentration, or exaggerated startle response.

You may notice several of these reactions in your child immediately following the crisis. However, if these extreme reactions continue over numerous weeks, your child probably needs extra assistance in dealing with the crisis.

Revised from the National Association of School Psychologists