

I-CART

Indiana Crisis Assistance Response Team

TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Healing from trauma is not serendipitous; it does not simply occur with the passing of time or because children are inherently resilient. There is, in fact, nothing simple about childhood trauma. When ignored, the memories and distress do not go away. (Monahan, 1993)

Talking with children about traumatic events is beneficial in helping them move beyond the event. Adults also have reactions that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The following suggestions and questions can be beneficial in the crisis intervention process for both children and adults. The questions and discussion can be adjusted for all age groups. Giving both children and adults the opportunity to discuss an event through these types of questions can help reduce the impact and/or preoccupation with the event.

TALKING TO THE CHILD/ADOLESCENT:

1. **Listening.** The single most important support that a caring adult can provide is a listening ear. Let the child talk and lead the discussion. Good listening involves acknowledging and accepting all feelings, fears and concerns as real. Reflecting back what you have heard; echoing words or phrases that you have heard the child use; clarifying what you have heard; helping the child find new or alternative words that repeat or enhance what is being said; and periodically summarizing (briefly) what you have heard the child say, are all good listening skills.
2. **Provide opportunities to talk.** If a child is not talking about an event, it does not necessarily mean that he/she does not need to talk about it or is through talking about it. Continue to provide opportunities to talk. Some children (and adults) may need to be able to talk about the disaster with a special emphasis on what they have seen, what they have heard, and what they are experiencing physically and emotionally.
3. **Normalize children's reactions and feelings.** Let them know that their feelings, behavior, etc. are common reactions, even for adults. Avoid saying... "you shouldn't feel that way" or "you don't need to worry about that." Rather than being reassuring, it tells the child that he/she is "wrong" in how he/she is feeling.
4. **Support systems.** Help children identify and/or reconnect with their support systems. This may be family, clergy, school staff, etc. Talk about what are the things they normally do to make them feel safe or deal with their feelings.
5. **Coping skills.** Help children reconnect and/or use their coping skills (drawing, music, writing, play, exercise, reading, security limits, etc.)

6. Importance of the known. Help children reconnect with what is "certain" and "consistent" in their lives. Much of what they see or hear surrounding a traumatic event creates uncertainty.
7. Keep routines. Keep home and school routines as normal as possible. This will decrease out of control feelings and reassure children that there is "certainty and predictability" in their life.
8. Play. Understand that children frequently use play to express themselves. They may reenact the disaster or event as a means of expressing themselves. They may link unrelated events to the disaster or use magical thinking to explain what has occurred. The child needs to be allowed to engage in this play. Older children and even adolescents may temporarily revert to "play" behavior.
9. Modeling reactions. Be aware that you are role modeling how to cope with stress and unpredictable events in life. Process your own feelings and fears. You do not need to hide your feelings from a child but make sure you talk with the child about how everyone has reactions and feelings about what has happened. Don't scare children with stories of it could have "been worse" or "it might happen here."
10. Helping. Support your child if they want to help those affected by the disaster. Food drives, clothing banks, etc. appreciate donations or volunteers.

BE AWARE OF:

- **Common reactions.** Be aware of common stress reactions:
 - a. difficulty concentrating, remembering, learning, thinking and processing
 - b. changes in behavior (withdrawal, silence, hyperactivity; over or under eating or sleeping, anger, acting out)
 - c. regressive behavior
 - d. nightmares
 - e. irritability, anger, anxiety
 - f. clinging behavior, especially in young children
- **Changes in behavior.** Be aware that changes in behavior may occur during, soon after, or even weeks after an event occurs.
- **Other life events.** Know that reactions may be escalated by unresolved feeling about other life events (divorce, loss, a recent move, etc.). A significant life event may be one that seems insignificant for an adult, but be extremely important to a child. Look at the world through the eyes of the child.