

Children and Trauma

A Guide to Helping Children Cope
with a Traumatic Event



Victim Assistance Unit
Denver Police Department
1331 Cherokee Street
Denver, Colorado 80204
(720) 913-6035

Healing Rights For Children

A simple guide intended to help and empower children and the adults in their lives after a traumatic event.

- ◆ **I have the right to have my own unique feelings about the trauma.** I may feel mad, sad or lonely. I may feel scared, numb or sometimes not anything at all. No one will feel exactly the same way.
- ◆ **I have the right to think and talk about my trauma whenever I feel like talking.** Sometimes I will think about what happened and it will probably scare me. However, when I need to talk I will find someone who will listen to me and love me. It's also okay for me not to want to talk or think about it.
- ◆ **I have the right to show my feelings about the trauma in my own way.** Even though a sad thing has happened to me, I still may want to play or laugh because it makes me feel better for a while. It's okay for me to get mad or scream or cry. Please don't think I'm bad because it only means I'm having scary feelings that I need your help with.
- ◆ **I have the right to need other people to help me with my feelings, especially the grown-ups who care about me.** Mostly, I need them to pay attention to what I'm feeling or saying and to love me no matter what.
- ◆ **I have the right to get upset about normal, everyday problems.** I might feel grumpy and have trouble getting along with others sometimes.
- ◆ **I have the right to have "griefbursts".** Griefbursts are sudden, unexpected feelings of sadness that just hit me sometimes; even long after the trauma. These feelings can be scary and when they happen I might not want to be alone. I might just need to be close to you.
- ◆ **I have the right to try and figure out why the trauma occurred.** It's okay if you don't have the answer to all my *why* questions. They are the hardest questions in the world.
- ◆ **I have the right to move forward and with time, to heal.** Even though I may not forget the trauma, I will go on and try to live a happy life. More than anything I need you to love me, guide me and listen to me.

How Can I Help?

Maintain Normalcy: Keep family routines as normal as possible including meals, activities and bedtimes. This helps children feel more secure. Children should stay with people they are familiar with as much as possible.

Indulge In Special Needs: Give in to special needs such as holding or hugging children more than usual or allowing them to sleep with a light on or with a favorite teddy bear or blanket. Give them permission to be clingy rather than socially outgoing. There is no such thing as giving children too much love. Especially now, they need your love and support.

Communicate: Talk about what happened. Each child will express his/her feelings differently. Give children honest, simple and brief answers to their questions. Use words that will not confuse them or make them more afraid (e.g., using the word "sleep" for death). Make sure your children understand your answers and the meaning you intend. Children are often confused about their feelings and talking with them can only serve to clarify what they understand and how they feel about the trauma they experienced.

When To Seek Professional Help

If you determine that counseling might be helpful for your child, it does not mean he or she is "mentally ill" nor does it mean that you have done a bad job supporting him or her. Many adults and children find it is beneficial to talk to a counselor who specializes in post-traumatic reactions. The reactions described in this brochure are viewed as *normal* reactions to abnormal or trauma-induced situations. However, seeking professional assistance is a good idea if a child continues to experience adverse reactions for longer than three months following the trauma.

Please feel free to contact the Victim Assistance Unit if you need advocacy, information or referrals.

**Office Hours are:
7:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Everyday**

Victimization And Trauma

Victimization is a stressful situation that can result in a crisis for the victim, the victim's family or witness(es) of a crime or traumatic event.

Trauma is a painful emotional experience or shock that can create lasting emotional effects for the victim or witness. The traumatic event is often sudden, arbitrary and/or unpredictable.

Sudden: The event often occurs without warning. It is impossible to foresee.

Arbitrary: There does not appear to be a reason or an explanation for the event. The event often will leave the victim or witness with questions: Why me? Why my child(ren)?

Unpredictable: One never knows it will happen. The event cannot be anticipated.

As a result of victimization or trauma, children's view of their world as a safe or predictable place is temporarily lost. Most children have a difficult time understanding a traumatic event and are afraid that it will happen again.

Children may display behavior or have thoughts you do not understand. Your response is essential in helping your child(ren) recover from a traumatic event faster and more thoroughly.

This pamphlet is intended to help you to understand and/or anticipate what to expect. This is a guide only. Do not hesitate to ask for help from your doctor, pediatrician, minister, rabbi, counselor or trained professional.

How Children Might React To Trauma

Fear And Anxiety: Children affected by trauma are often afraid that the trauma will happen again or that someone they love will be hurt. A primary fear that children have is that they will be left alone.

Regressive Behavior: Children's fears and anxieties may cause them to act younger than their age. It is possible for them to display behaviors such as: bed-wetting, thumb sucking, being very clingy or exhibiting a strong fear of strangers.

Bedtime Problems: Frequently, children will show their anxieties and fears through having nightmares, being afraid of the dark or of sleeping alone. They may also have trouble falling or staying asleep.

Physical Reactions: Some children have stomachaches, headaches, nausea, changes in appetite or other physical symptoms of distress. These physical reactions are typically in response to feelings of vulnerability, fear, guilt and/or anger.

"Trigger" Responses: Sometimes children will associate a particular smell, sound, object or activity with the trauma. When children are exposed to something associated with the event, that reminder may cause them to experience anxiety and/or physical reactions.

Concentration Difficulties: Children of all ages may experience difficulties with concentration. Many find that they are easily distracted and feel confused or disoriented. Children who have experienced trauma often have shortened attention spans and may lack the attention to detail they previously displayed.

Trauma Reactions According To Age

Birth - Two Years

Children in this age group tend to react like sponges, absorbing the emotions and reactions of those around them. Pre-verbal children do not have the words to describe how they are feeling. Infants often react by being irritable and crying more than usual or by wanting to be held and cuddled more. As children get older their play may involve more acting out of the event or acting out their caregivers' reactions to the trauma. Children in this age group can retain memories of particular sights, sounds or smells that will remind them of the trauma.

Two - Six Years

This age group continues to be greatly affected by their caregivers' reactions. These children often feel helpless or powerless. This is in part due to their age and size. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity. They often will re-enact the event in their play. Children at this age are very concrete in their thinking and it is important that as an adult who loves them, you give them truthful and simple answers.

Seven - Twelve Years

Children in this age group have begun to develop more abstract thinking abilities and generally have the ability to understand the trauma. These children will sometimes become preoccupied with the details of the trauma and want to discuss it frequently.

This can interfere with their ability to focus at school and as a result, their academic performance may decline.