

Name

**Children Can Learn Now - Coping Skills for a Lifetime**

***by Sherry Williams White***

I’ve been working with the New York Fire Department, a fireman, widows of firemen and their children. One of the most rewarding experiences of my entire career in grief work, talking with and helping these people has been both exhausting and exhilarating. One issue pressing the hearts of these people is how to help their children understand and cope with the tragedy.

When a death is unexpected and traumatic, our sense of reality is destroyed and everything seems out of control. When our reality is shattered, it is normal to feel afraid because we no longer feel safe in our home, in our school, in our environment, in our world.

For children, there is a real need to find something in their life that is normal, or just the way it used to be, in order to feel safe again. Children, like adults, try to get their surroundings back in control and familiar so they can feel secure in them again.

I have adapted a report by the Penn State Hershey Medical Center and College of Medicine that can help you deal with children after a disaster. You want to watch for many of the following signs, and seek the attention of a professional counselor if you see them.

**Warning Signals**

* Refusing to go to school, clinging to home.
* Shadowing a parent, adult, or older sibling.
* Suffering sleep disturbances like nightmares, screaming, or bed-wetting.
* Having problems falling or staying asleep.
* Behaving in an unusual way for that particular child.
* Having physical complaints for which no cause can be found.
* Withdrawing from family and friends.
* Markedly increasing or decreasing activity.
* Being preoccupied with the traumatic event.
* Acting younger than his or her age.

**How to Help**

Here are some things you can do to help your child:

* Try to get back on a normal schedule as soon as possible.
* Answer questions reassuringly but honestly.
* Don’t avoid difficult questions.
* Give clear, concise and age-appropriate information about what has happened.
* Let the child talk about the event.
* Listen to the child’s views of the events at the time of the disaster and about events that followed.
* Ask open-ended questions so he or she feels free to express feelings.
* Reinforce that the event was indeed tragic and that everything that can is being done to prevent such an event from happening again.
* Be honest. It’s okay to let the child know that the event was upsetting to you, too.
* Try to limit activities that cause anxiety, like television news or scary movies and stories.
* Be available for your child.
* Know the facts about what happened so you can squelch any rumors.
* Give your child an opportunity to create or participate in memorials for the people who died.

If we allow children to explore the many dimensions of hurt, loss, pain and grief, we can help them move through the feelings that accompany a tragic event. In addition, as they work through this process, they build strength and acquire coping strategies that will be with them the rest of their lives.