

Helping Our Children Respond to Traumatic Events
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The tragic school shooting in Sandy Hook, Connecticut has propelled us to share our thoughts about how you can help your children cope with traumatic events. What we want to do here is outline a process that we have developed that we believe will be helpful to you. There are six steps that make up the process and they can be used to help yourself and others. We will begin with how to apply them to yourself, as that is where you need to begin.

Connect: You need to connect with yourself first, which you can do by taking time out to slow down and go through these steps.

Validate: Sometimes parents question their capacity to be able to change things when there has been a traumatic event. This can affect one's sense of competence and value as a parent. So it's really helps to be compassionate with yourself for insecure feelings and remind yourself that you are a valuable person and your child needs you.

Become Aware: It's important to notice what is going on inside of you, your thoughts and feelings for when you notice them, you will feel more balanced and have more choices.

Accept Your Reactions: Accept your feelings and reactions, rather than judge them. People respond very differently to traumatic events. There is no "right" way to feel, or not feel.

Make Choices: One of the struggles with traumatic events is that they remind us of our limitations; therefore we need to see what choices we have, and not be paralyzed by the event. For example, a very moving "action" was after 9/11 when those working in NY with the Red Cross received several boxes full of teddy bears for the children and the note that came with the teddy bears said: "For the children of NY, from the children of Oklahoma." Like the children from Oklahoma, we cannot stop the pain, but you can do something that allows you to be pro-active for good.

Seek Support: For many people, reaching out for support is very hard but if you are feeling in pain, alone and/or abandoned, it is important for you to reach out to others. Support really does help, as one of our deepest needs as humans is for connection.

So now that we have covered how to use these steps to help yourself, here is how you can use them to help your children.

Connect: Let them know you care and find a time and space that fits for them to share.

Validate: Children feel valued when we spend time with them. And also they may need to hear from you something like: you love them, that all feelings or lack of feelings are okay and that you are glad they are alive. Somehow the attention to those who have died could be interpreted that it is through dying that we become important. So be there for them to celebrate who they are. (Today, for example, a

very sensitive 13 year old, who was crying about all those children who were killed, also got an honor award from her school, so her Dad is taking her today to get her a gift to celebrate her award.

Become Aware: Help the child with his/her feelings and thoughts, paying attention to their developmental age. Let them tell you. Remember also that children tolerance for our “adult” talking is low, so let them guide you.

Accept Differences: Accepting differences in how we react and see events is so important at times like this. It is hard to deal with children’s fears and the temptation is to come with answers too fast. Be patient to hear their fears, and then together come up with some answers. This may take more than one conversation.

Make Choices: Here is where you and the child can be creative in some of the things you can do similar to the children of Oklahoma sending the Teddy Bears. It is our experience that children can be amazing creative and see choices that will help them if we create the space for this. And at the same time, there is the importance of routine...

Give Support: Help kids to find out what are some of their own inner supports they can use, such as slowing their breathing, remembering their courage for hard things that they have learned to do, and some of the smart things they do for safety, like wearing a helmet when riding a bike. Help children also by identifying other people who can be helpful to them, such a friends and relatives, special counselors, teachers, and other adults in our community.

This is not easy, yet we can work out some ways of dealing with trauma and pain that allows us to have some choices. ...