

Helping Children Deal with Traumatic Events

These suggestions and ideas related to debriefing children will be made with the assumption that should trauma be involved, those preparing to debrief children are seeking experienced or licensed help in doing so. Even when the trauma would not seem to be something that involved children personally or overtly, debriefing with children when parents or siblings are affected by trauma demands special experience in both trauma and experience with the age of the children being debriefed or included in family debriefing.

Debriefing offers a structure for listening and talking to a traumatized child. It opens the door for the child to begin to share with you. It helps you to discover how the child feels, and it provides an opportunity for the child to understand what happened. It usually makes the child feel stronger and less vulnerable.

What Debriefing Does

- Assists the child in “venting” their thoughts and feelings
- Helps the child develop a more complete understanding of what happened
- Normalizes the child’s responses
- Teaches the child appropriate coping skills
- Assists the child in adjusting to the trauma

Debriefing will not heal emotional wounds of a trauma overnight, but it will help speed the healing and recovery rate for the child.

STEP 1: Fact Phase

Have the child **share the story** through words, pictures, play, role-play, or writing

- Pay attention to every detail (what was seen, smelled, touched, heard)
- Look for important omissions of facts
- Help the child piece together important parts of the events in their memory

STEP 2: Feeling Phase

Have the child **share feelings** about the events

- What were the child’s feelings during the incident?
- What are the child’s feelings now?
- Listen carefully for the fears the child expresses (validate them, don’t discount or diminish)

STEP 3: Thought Phase

Have the child **share thoughts** about the events

- What is the child wondering or worrying about?
- Correct misinformation and misconceptions

STEP 4: Healing Phase

Normalize the reaction and provide support

- Assure the child that what the child is thinking and feeling is normal
- Encourage the child to talk about the experience, to ask questions, and to share the nightmares
- Help the child come up with suggestions for what to do when afraid

Source: Adapted from Brooks & Siegel. 1996, *The Scared Child*. Taken from the Society of Christian Schools in BC, Responding to a School Emergency.