

# Parents Helping Children After Traumatic Events

When a child is indirectly involved but exposed by media or conversations about a traumatic event of community casualties it is important to be observant and ask simple questions. Developmentally a child's age means conversations can range from a short matter of fact response with the child moving on to play with something. Have conversations in spurts and do not make it a mission to pull answers out that may not be there.

A child will respond in direct proportion to the how they see the grown ups in their lives acting, reacting or responding. Reassuring your child is important. Do it often and be mindful that random comments may seem out of place. Chances are the had a passing thought and those are the times to ask questions such as what made you think about that? How do you feel about that.

Do not ask a child how something make them feel. Be clear and ask how they feel. It is important to communicate factually as so as not to use language that can pass along the idea that an event "Makes" them feel a certain way. An indent is an event and id does not need to define or attach feeling to it. Doing so can lead to implanting the idea tao the next time a similar situation happens, they can expect that event t o"make them feel" a certain way.

An in-depth debriefing or question answer session of children should only be conducted by an experienced or licensed professional. 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. Family debriefings are advisable

## 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.