

Helping Children Cope With Crisis-Related Anxiety

Children experience the same sense of helplessness that adults feel in times of crisis. In addition, children can sense the tension and anxiety in the adults around them. Unfortunately, children lack the life experience that adults possess to help them cope with their feelings. It is vital that adults are honest and open with the children in their care, and that you talk to them about how the current crisis and situation affects them - using age-appropriate language.

Here are some suggestions.

- Children need to be frequently assured that they are safe. It also helps to stick to your daily routine as much as possible.
- Encourage children to communicate their feelings. It might be easier for them to express themselves by drawing instead of talking. Let them tell you what their picture means.
- With younger children, thumb sucking, bed-wetting, or a fear of being alone may reappear or intensify. They may develop various aches and pains (usually stomach ache) and try to avoid school. Provide the extra reassurance and comfort that they need by spending time with them, especially at bed time. Try to get them to explain what frightens them so you can help alleviate those fears.
- Don't tell a child not to worry. Instead, try to identify their specific fears and talk to them about that issue.
- Children are often afraid that something will happen to their parents (or caregiver). Help reassure them, but don't make promises you cannot keep - like saying "nothing is going to happen to your Dad."
- Allow children to express themselves. Don't label their feelings as childish, silly, or "cute."
- In many cases, it is helpful to monitor a child's media exposure. Do not allow them to watch or listen to media that will feed their fears. Instead, occupy them with activities that will take their minds off of the current crisis or event.
- As with any other situation, never hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or at a loss when working with children.