



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## RESTORING A SENSE OF WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

### *Tips for Parents, Caregivers and Professionals*

Children are often exposed both directly and indirectly to the effects of disasters such as mass shootings. While some will live in close proximity to an area or community directly impacted by disaster, many others will learn about it through the media or from their parents or friends. Parents and caregivers will need to answer children's questions and reassure them about their safety.

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#### **Communicate effectively with your children.**

- Keep your statements simple, factual, clear and sensitively worded.
- Do not overwhelm children with too much information.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you ask them what they have heard and what they have questions about.
- Children will get information from other children and adults and from the media. Make sure that your children do not misunderstand this information by asking them what they have heard.

#### **If children are anxious or fearful, let them know that you understand and will help them with their feelings.**

- Children's distress responses may be based on a different event. Inquire what their distress is about.
- Distress in such situations is usually very transient. If children's distress persists, seek help from a trusted provider such as their pediatrician.
- Some children may act out as a reaction or may become very quiet. Talk to your child about what is troubling them and not punish or reprimand them for their reactions, but help them to understand that talking may help.

#### **A common question is "Why do these things happen?" Here are some possible responses.**

- We usually cannot be sure what led a specific individual to act in such a way.
- Such events can result from many causes including mental illness, rage, extreme political or religious beliefs, and hatred.
- Do not stigmatize groups of people who fall within the same or a similar demographic group as an alleged offender.
- Help children understand that government authorities work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they happen.

#### **You can increase your child's sense of safety by**

- Knowing their whereabouts, and when they are to return home.
- A clear method of communication in normal and emergency situations (e.g. cell phone and a meeting place if you cannot communicate with each other).
- Keeping them away from places or situations that are likely to put them in danger.
- Being aware of community changes about risks that might surface.

#### **How do you plan for an emergency?**

- Discuss possible emergency situations with your children.
- Talk calmly with them about what they can do if they feel they are in danger.
- Instruct them to trust and seek help from police and other authorities.
- Tell your children to say something to an adult when they see something suspicious.

*Continued*

## Online Resources

If you have any questions about your child's health or response to a traumatic event you can seek professional advice from a community primary care or behavioral care provider or review additional resources at the following sites:

- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
[www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
[www.ncstn.org](http://www.ncstn.org)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)
- American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- American Psychiatric Association  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)
- American Psychological Association  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)
- American Red Cross  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences  
4301 Jones Bridge Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-4799  
[www.CSTSONline.org](http://www.CSTSONline.org) | [cstsinfo@usuhs.mil](mailto:cstsinfo@usuhs.mil)