

COPING STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN FOLLOWING TRAUMA

(This handout is appropriate for families in the aftermath of trauma)

Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships. Love and care in the family is a primary need. Extra time should be spent with children to let them know that someone will take care of them and, if parents are survivors, that their parents have reassumed their former role as protector and nurturer is important. Physical closeness is needed.

It is important to talk to children about the tragedy – to address the irrationality and suddenness of disaster. Children need to be allowed to ventilate their feelings, as do adults, and they have a similar need to have those feelings validated. Reenactments and play about the catastrophe should be encouraged. It may be useful to provide them with special time to paint, draw, or write about the event. Adults or older children may help pre-school children reenact the event since pre-school children may not be able to imagine alternative “endings” to the disaster and hence may feel particularly helpless.

Parents should be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviors and accept the manifestation of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the tragedy.

Parents should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event – spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.

Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.

Since children are often reluctant to initiate conversations about trauma, it may be helpful to ask them what they think other children felt or thought about the event.

Reaffirming the future and talking in “hopeful” terms about future events can help a child rebuild trust and faith in her own future and the world. Often parental despair interferes with a child’s ability to recover.

Issues of death should be addresses concretely. The child is not to blame for others’ deaths. The death is not a rejection of the child. Death is permanent and sad. The grieving process should be acknowledged and shared.

*This information is from the National Organization for Victim Assistance
Washington, D.C., October 1987.*