

Families Can Help Their Child After a Traumatic Event or Accident

Children can and do recover from traumatic events! As parents, you play an important role in helping your children and your family cope with the stress reactions that can follow these events. Try to maintain a balanced perspective. Try to maintain a hopeful belief that your child will heal emotionally and that your family will recover from the event.

Family members may each react differently to a traumatic event that a child has experienced. Reactions will differ, depending not only on the family member's age, developmental level, and own trauma history, but also on his or her relationship with the child and personal exposure to the event. While all family members may be upset, only some might have posttraumatic stress reactions; each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience. While your world may feel changed forever after an injury or accident, you, your children and family members, are more resilient than you might imagine. You have a great ability to heal and return to feeling “normal” again.

When family members care for and support each other, they can often overcome the fears and stress of traumatic accidents. Some families grow stronger after a traumatic event and are even able to help others in need. Of the many ways to cope and heal from traumatic stress, many families count on these: community support, spiritual beliefs, friends and other families, and support from a mental health provider.

What Can my Family Do to Recover?

- **BE PATIENT.** There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Try not to push your child to “just get over it.” Instead, reassure him or her that they do not need to feel guilty or bad about any feelings or thoughts. Correct any faulty beliefs they have about being responsible for the accident.
- **MODEL A CALM, COMPOSED, AND CURIOUS APPROACH** about your child’s treatment and approach medical staff like partners. Your child looks to you to set the tone during medical procedures. This can be difficult, so if you need help, speak with our staff for tips.
- **MAINTAIN REGULAR HOME** (mealtime, bedtime) **AND SCHOOL SCHEDULES** and routines to support the process of recovery. Make sure your child continues to go to school and stays in school, as long as the medical staff permit it.
- **LET YOUR CHILD TALK ABOUT THE INJURY** when and if they feel ready. Praise them for being strong when they talk about it, but don’t force the issue if they don’t feel like sharing. Some kids might prefer to draw or write about their experiences. Either way, encouragement and praise can help them get feelings out.
- **SPEND EXTRA ONE-ON-ONE TIME DAILY** with your child in a shared game or activity he/she enjoys (no screens!). During this time, lavish attention on your child by enthusiastically praising and encouraging him/her, reflecting out loud what you see him/her doing, imitating, and describing what he/she is doing. One-on-one time makes children feel safe, and it can help prevent behavior problems.
- **AIM FOR EVERYONE IN THE FAMILY** to get good sleep, eat healthy food, and spend time being active every day, as permitted by the medical team.



- **ALLOW YOUR CHILD PLENTY OF TIME TO PLAY** and enjoy recreational activities like sports, particularly favorite games and activities with 'best' and familiar friends.
- **ENGAGE IN FUN ACTIVITIES YOU BOTH ENJOY.** Things that are active and social are the best to support adjustment and mood. Purposefully schedule something daily.
- **TAKE TIME TO THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE** of your child's accident and any past traumatic events you may have experienced. Your own history and your feelings about your child's accident will influence how you react. Talking to someone about your feelings will help you help your child (e.g., friend, therapist).
- **CONSIDER STARTING A DAILY REFLECTIVE GRATITUDE PRACTICE** to actively bring focus to the things in your life for which you are most thankful. This can boost your mood and help make your parenting behaviors more positive.
- **LEARN ABOUT THE COMMON REACTIONS THAT SOME CHILDREN HAVE TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS:** invasive memories of the trauma, avoidance of any reminders of the event, negative thinking or changes of mood or behaviors since the event, and lasting feelings of anxiety, physical reactions, or feeling he/she is always in danger. If you have concerns about you or your child's experience of these symptoms, reach out to a mental health professional for evaluation and consultation.

Common Reactions

First Weeks and Months Home

Even with the support of family members and others, some children remain distressed. If your child's reactions (nightmares, recurrent thoughts, fears/clinginess, avoidance, sadness, jumpiness, tantrums) have been getting worse, or your family is having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble interfering with you or your child's normal life, you should seek a referral for a qualified mental health professional (psychologist, clinical social worker, psychiatrist) with experience in assessing and treating child traumatic stress or posttraumatic stress disorder. Entering treatment can have concrete, beneficial results that will help your child and your family feel better, grow stronger, and recover.

Long Term Effects

While many children and families cope well over time, for some, there are emotional concerns that present months or years after the injury. Common issues include mood, low self-esteem, anxiety concerns, body image disturbances, and family or relationship problems. Parents can help by providing reassurance, opportunities for emotional expression, access to self-esteem boosting experiences, connecting their child to others who have been through something similar, and reaching out to licensed mental health practitioners. There are resources for families from Children's National! Also, for burn-specific resources check out the DC Firefighters Fund, The Phoenix Society and American Burn Association.

*For needs at any time, please contact the Trauma/Burn Psychologist, **Carrie Tully, PhD, LCP** at Children's National Hospital (202-476-4546) to learn about evidence-based child and adolescent mental health treatment options.*
