



PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS FOLLOWING A CRISIS:

Children respond to crises in a variety of ways. Adults who have worked directly or indirectly with affected children are excellent sources for reporting behavioral information. Some reported symptoms are external and appear to be easily identifiable, while internalized symptoms present more subtly. Consequently, mental health interventions must address the atypical behaviors exhibited from children within broad developmental stages. The following are practical interventions to be tried with children in the aftermath of experiencing a crisis event. These interventions may overlap age groups.

Preschoolers:

Preschoolers generally do not comprehend the event. Safety and security are the primary needs of this age group. Children oftentimes “pick up” their emotional cues from the adults around them.

The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Project a sense of stability and preserve routine events
- Provide and maintain nurturance, support, and comfort to affected children
- Reassure children that they are physically safe
- Encourage children to express thoughts and feelings via drawings, coloring, puppet play, or other play therapy modalities
- Correct (in simple terms) any misinterpretations of the event reported by children

Elementary School:

Elementary age children try to make sense of the event in concrete terms. Common cognitive distortions include “magical thinking” regarding the permanence of death, unrealistic expectations of their role in causing the event, and intense fears of dying or losing other loved ones.

The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Emphasize their physical safety
- Encourage children to verbally express their perceptions of the event, as well as express their reactions or fears
- Help them to sort out fact from fantasy or hearsay
- Validate their feelings by highlighting the normalcy of general feelings and actions
- Reassure children regarding self-adequacy, assist in realistically assigning responsibility for the origin of the crisis, and reassure and help children to anticipate what might happen in the future
- Allow children to draw, chronicle events in a personal journal, and read books
- Offer stress relief activities and physical outlets
- Utilize memory books, cards, and memorial drawings

Middle School:

Middle school age children are seeking peer acceptance, yet trying to maintain a measure of unique self-expression. The experience of a crisis event may compromise notions of self-adequacy, identity, and the meaning of life, resulting in intense emotions and major confusion.

The following suggestions are provided for your consideration:

- Emphasize their safety
- Assist children in differentiating facts from rumors or hearsay
- Validate the confusion that they are presently experiencing
- Normalize their feelings and actions and help them anticipate future experiences



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- Help facilitate self-expression and memorializing (drawings, paintings, poems, journaling, and discussions)
- Assist in exploring the meaning of death
- Discuss previous experiences with similar crises
- Explore religious/spiritual beliefs and morals
- Review stress management techniques and coping skills

(NIMH, 2007; Mental Health America, 2009; & University of Michigan-Counseling and Psychological Services)