



# Little Listeners in an Uncertain World:

## Coping strategies for you and your young child after traumatic events

### ***Your world has changed. How are you handling it?***

Traumatic events, such as natural disasters, are especially difficult times for parents who feel tremendous responsibility in trying to make their babies feel safe when they themselves don't. When you're anxious, your child often senses it. The first step in taking care of your child is taking care of yourself.

#### **Tune into yourself**

Stress is a normal part of everyday life. But after a traumatic event, feelings of worry and insecurity affect our daily lives. The following are some changes you may experience:

- Sleep difficulties, like middle-of-the-night awakenings and nightmares.
- Changes in eating habits, such as loss of appetite, overeating.
- Irritability, emotional outbursts and tearfulness.
- A generalized sense of fear and anxiety, especially for your child's safety.
- Lack of energy and decreased pleasure in daily living.
- The feeling that you have little control over your life.
- Constant thoughts about the traumatic event.
- A feeling of hopelessness about the future.

#### **What you can do**

You may find yourself feeling nervous, moody or blue.

**When you're worried or sad, your child knows it.** It's important to be tuned in to your feelings and needs and to nurture yourself. By soothing yourself, you are also helping to soothe and reassure your child. For example:

- Stay connected. Keep in close touch with family and friends. Share your feelings, fears and concerns.
- Maintain your daily routine as best you can.
- Make time for the things you enjoy.
- Turn off the TV and radio if they are making you anxious.
- Enjoy your child. Delight in the everyday moments that you both enjoy.
- Rest, exercise and try to eat regular, balanced meals.
- Consider talking to a trusted health professional or seeking other professional help if you have further questions or need more support.

### ***Your world has changed. How is your child coping?***

How much are young children affected by events that take place around them? A lot. Babies are active players in the world. Even though they may not understand the meaning of what they see or hear, children absorb the images that surround them and are deeply impacted by the emotions of the people they rely on for love and security.

There's nothing "simple" about childhood. Young children are complex human beings who react to situations in different ways, depending on their age, stage of development and temperament. While you may not understand exactly why your child acts as she does, your sensitive response can help your child cope during a difficult time.



## Helping your child cope

The primary role of parents is to protect children. One important way to do this is to prevent their exposure to information they cannot handle. Babies and toddlers do not need to be told about traumatic events that they have no way of understanding. Keep the following in mind:

- Turn off TV and radio news reports; don't leave newspapers lying around.
- Ask friends and family members not to discuss scary events around your child.
- Maintain a regular routine with your child.
- Respond to your child's need for increased attention, comfort and reassurance. This will make him feel safer sooner.
- Pay close attention to your child's feelings and validate them. Ignoring feelings does not make them go away.
- Help your child identify her feelings by naming them, i.e., "scared," "sad," "angry."
- Offer your child safe ways to express feelings, such as drawing, pretend play, or telling stories.
- Don't discourage your child's play because you find it disturbing. Many young children work through frightening events by reenacting them in play. If your child seems to be distressed by his play, comfort him and offer another activity.
- Be patient and calm when your child is clingy, whiny and aggressive. He needs you to help him regain control and feel safe.
- Answer children's questions according to their level of understanding: "Yes, a bad thing happened but we are keeping you safe."

## Behaviors you might see

- Increased clinginess, crying and whining.
- Greater fear of separation from parents.
- Increase in aggressive behavior.
- More withdrawn and harder to engage.
- Play that acts out scary events.
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns.
- More easily frustrated and harder to comfort.
- A return to earlier behaviors, like frequent night-time awakenings and thumb sucking.



## ***Your world has changed. But the joy of parenting prevails.***

Providing your child with sensitive and responsive care takes a lot of emotional and physical energy. But the everyday moments you share with your child can be healing for both of you. Do things together that feel good:

- Laugh and be silly together.
- Read your favorite stories
- Listen to music and sing along.
- Take walks and enjoy new discoveries.
- Enjoy the warmth of cuddling close.
- Plan special outings like a picnic in the park, a trip to the zoo or a visit to a friend.

This shared joy, and the sense of fulfillment that comes from it, can ease the burden and provide an important foundation for coping during these difficult times.



For an in-depth exploration of the ideas addressed in this handout, please visit the ZERO TO THREE web site at [www.zerotothree.org/coping](http://www.zerotothree.org/coping). You will find additional information and links to resources.

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