

7 tips to help your child cope with witnessing tragedy

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When children witness tragedies, from acts of violence to the sudden loss of a loved one, to images of a war zone like Ukraine, they often turn to their families for support and reassurance. We asked UC Davis child

psychologist Brandi Hawk for her advice on how parents and families can help children through these dark times and how to provide a safe space for them to work through their emotions.

Here are Hawk's top 7 tips:

1. Be honest and open. Let the child lead the discussion and be available for their questions and conversations. Answer questions factually and honestly, providing age-appropriate information. "Ask them if there is anything they want to talk about," Hawk said. "Don't overwhelm them with information or force them to talk if they don't want to."

2. Be a [role model](#) and show kids how you cope. Parents should talk about their own feelings and how they take care of themselves when they are feeling sad. Show children healthy ways of coping with tragedy. Practice self-care. Offer play, art, and music as opportunities for your child to express their feelings safely.

3. Allow kids to see you cry. "Modeling sadness when you feel sad will teach your children that it's okay to show their emotions. They don't need to hide their sadness or keep their feelings bottled up inside," Hawk said.

4. Spend time creating happy moments. Participate in activities the child enjoys. Spend a few minutes playing, drawing, crafting or playing a game with your child every day. A surprise ice cream or funny movie can be a welcome treat.

5. Keep a routine. Children find reassurance in the usual routines of school and home life that they can count on, Hawk said.

6. Look out for acute stress reactions, which may be signs of acute stress disorder, an intense, unpleasant psychological reaction after a stressful

event. Beware of symptoms including:

1. Physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, chest pain, nausea or stomach ache
2. Psychological symptoms such as screaming, crying or anxiety
3. Withdrawal, spending more time alone, or not seeming to have fun
4. Recurrent dreams or flashbacks
5. Difficulty concentrating
6. Angry outbursts
7. Poor sleep

7. Seek professional help for your child to help them process their grief. Mental health support can come from a [child psychologist](#) or therapist that your child feels comfortable talking to.

"Children process trauma and tragedy in different ways. Our job as parents is to provide them with the support to help them navigate through these challenges and let them know that they are safe and loved," Hawk said.

Provided by UC Davis

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