

Tips for Helping a Young Child Process a Traumatic Event

A traumatic event is not uncommon in childhood. This could be a disruption of homelife like a move, a divorce or parental strife. It could be a change in school or a bullying event. Although trauma seems more obvious when violence or significant accidents occur, life can also present a jarring experience to young children in less obvious forms.

Here are a few tips for parenting a child who has suffered a traumatic event:

1. Allow the child to have increased needs. They might be more clingy and need more one-on-one time with a parent, and it is best to embrace these extra needs while giving the child time to process the event. You might feel that you are spoiling the child and that they won't be able to resume normal independence. Given comfort and time, children can recover from difficult events, but if the process seems prolonged it can be helpful to seek medical or psychological support.
2. Keep a fairly consistent daily routine to give predictability (and therefore safety) to a child's life. Minimizing stress is the goal during recovery, and if children have a roadmap of their day-to-day activities they will experience less anxiety.
3. Alert your child's teacher that your child has suffered a traumatic event. You certainly do not need to give any details, but this communication will hopefully inspire the teacher to treat your child with extra patience and kindness, and may also lead the teacher to keep you informed regarding any concerning behavior they have observed at school.
4. Discuss the event with the child. This might seem counterintuitive as we want the child to recover and move on from a bad memory, but the child is likely already recounting the event over and over in their minds. As with any person who has experienced a negative event, children can alter their recollection over time by slightly revising the story again and again. You can walk them through the event using only facts but omitting the scary details. This practice might help prevent them from mentally altering the event to a more frightening version.
5. Help your child express their fears. Tell them that you want to know how they are feeling. Give them vocabulary to help them express their feelings. There are several books listed below that might help your child find the words that best fit their thoughts. Art can provide another beneficial method of expression for your child. Put blank paper and crayons/pens/paint out and allow them to go to it. If they want a prompt, you can consider having a blank picture of a person or animal and have them color it as the person/animal might feel.

Books for Young Children That Might Help Them to Deal with Trauma:

Whimsy's Heavy Things

Julie Kraulis
6-11 years

Healing Days: A Guide for Kids who Have Experienced Trauma
Susan Farber Staus
6-11 years

Once I was Very Very Scared
Chandra Ghosh Ippen
5-10 years

The Invisible String
Patrice Karst
4-11 years

Listening to My Body
Gabi Garcia
3-8 years