

Office of Student and Community Services
Department of Student Services
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

PARENT TIPS FOR HELPING CHILDREN HANDLE TRAGIC EVENTS

- Children sense the anxiety and tension in adults around them.
- Each child responds differently to tragic events, depending on his or her experiences, understanding and maturity.
- Children will interpret the tragic event as a personal danger to themselves and those they care about.
- Your child needs to talk about his or her feelings.
- Remember that our children are more vulnerable to stress due to our continued reactions to September 11th.

Signs of Stress

Parents should be alert to these changes in a child's behavior now or in the future:

- Persistent fears related to the incidents (such as fears about being hurt or being permanently separated from parents)
- Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, and/or bedwetting which persist more than several days after the event
- Loss of concentration and irritability
- Change in activity level
- Behavior problems, such as, misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical of the child
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found
- Withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, listlessness
- Preoccupation with the events of the incident

Age Appropriate Suggestions for How Parents Can Talk to Their Children at Home

- Children need comforting and frequent reassurance that they're safe. Make sure they get it.
- Be honest and open about the tragic event, but keep information age-appropriate.
- Encourage children to express their feelings through talking, drawing, or playing.
- Try to maintain your daily routines as much as possible.

Pre-School Age Children

- **Reassure young children that they're safe.**
- Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing the child's fears at night, by telephoning during the day and with extra physical comforting.
- **Get a better understanding of a child's feelings about the tragic event.**

- Discuss the tragic event with them, and find out each child’s particular fears and concerns.
- Answer all questions they may ask and provide them with loving comfort and care.

Grade-School Age Children

- **Provide realistic assurance.**

Don’t say tragic events will never affect your family again; children will know this isn’t true. Instead say, “You’re safe now, and I will always try to protect you,” or “Adults are working very hard to make things safe.”

- **Monitor children’s media viewing.**

- Images of the tragic event are extremely frightening to children, so consider limiting the amount of media coverage they see. A good way to do this without calling attention to your own concern is to regularly schedule an activity – story reading, drawing, movies, or letter writing, for example – during news shows.

- **Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing.**

As with younger children, school-age children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the tragic event. Allowing them to do so, and then talking about it, gives you the chance to “retell” the ending of the game or the story they have expressed in pictures with emphasis on personal safety.

- **Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.”**

Part of keeping discussion of the tragic event open and honest is not being afraid to say you don’t know how to answer a child’s question. When such an occasion arises, explain to your child that tragic events are extremely rare and may cause feelings with which even adults have trouble dealing. Temper this by explaining that, even so, you will always work very hard to keep your child(ren) safe and secure.

Adolescents- Special Concerns:

- Children with existing emotional problems such as depression may require careful supervision and additional support.
- Monitor their media exposure and information they receive on the Internet.
- Adolescents may turn to their friends for support. Encourage friends and families to get together and discuss the event to allay fears.
- Be aware that some adolescents may express their feelings through risky behaviors.

Reassure Your Children of Their Safety at School

- Reassure your child that adults and school are keeping them as safe as possible.
- Remind your child that if they need to talk while at school, that school staff (teachers, counselors and others) are available to talk with them.
- Encourage your child to go about their daily routine at school, just as you will at home.

For additional support contact:

Montgomery County Crisis Center (240) 777-4000

Montgomery County Hotline (301) 738-2255

For more information call the Mental Health Association of Montgomery County at (301) 424-0656 or visit www.mhamc.org.

