

Helping Your Child Recover from Trauma (Part I)

After a terrible experience, parents often wonder if their child is traumatized--and what they need to know to help. This fact sheet answers the questions most often asked by parents like yourself.

It is **normal** for children (and parents) to experience *some* of these stress reactions:

- disturbing memories, or a feeling that the injury is happening all over again
- repeated nightmares, or dreams of danger or death
- believing there are signs they must look for that foretell terrible events ("omens")
- pessimism about the future, or even an expectation of early death
- avoiding reminders of traumatic experiences (places, people, activities, conversations)
- fears which may seem unrelated but that express a sense of insecurity and vulnerability
- behavior changes (repeating the event[s] in play, acting younger than true age)
- emotional numbness (seeming to have no feelings, except perhaps anger)
- diminished interest in significant activities, except those that permit withdrawal (TV)
- physical symptoms, such as stomachaches and headaches
- feeling constantly on guard, or nervous and jumpy

Each child's reaction is a unique reflection of the best way that she or he knows to cope with stress. One child may cope by expressing fears and anxieties openly, where another may not say or show much but may behave differently (e.g., irritable, withdrawn, clingy). How can *you* help your child fully recover emotionally as well as physically? The best way is to support her or his *self esteem, sense of security, and individual way of coping*. Here are specific ways:

- Remember that most children fully get over normal stress reactions. What's important to look for is a *gradual reduction* in how **much** and how **often** she or he shows stress reactions
- Look for, and support creative ways your child finds to remember and come to grips with the trauma; for example, acting out the accident with toys so this time it comes out okay, or drawing aspects of the injury or hospitalization to express how it felt or still feels
- If the trauma involved emotional loss – for example, the death of a friend or family member, or the loss of the ability or opportunity to take part in important activities – your child may need time and support to go through the stages of *grieving*; you can help by being aware that grief involves shock, denial, and anger as well as deep sadness
- Listen with understanding if your child tells you about bad memories or difficulties with stress reactions. Say it's *okay to talk about what happened and about feelings*, but don't put pressure on your child to talk or to get over stress reactions any faster than naturally happens.
- Remember your child may need to make sense of trauma by making it into one of her or his "*life stories*;" by talking or playing with a friend, a teacher, a counselor, or a family member--don't be hurt or worried if it's not with you
- Show your child attention, love, and encouragement *just as you always have*; don't try "too hard" to fix the hurt or reassure your child that it's all right—let this happen naturally
- Don't overlook the emotional shock and **normal** stress reactions you and other family members have experienced; give yourself time to recover and *take care of yourself* too!
- If your child experiences stress reactions or emotional or behavioral problems that significantly *interfere with her or his well-being or adjustment* please let your child's doctor know that you want to get help without delay!

Please Continue on the Next Handout to learn about additional tools

- 1. Being a role model for stress management***
- 2. Helping your child deal with bad memories***

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1. Be a Role Model for Dealing with Stress: *When parents take care of themselves, this shows kids it is possible to deal with feelings about an frightening experience in calm, positive, caring ways. When a child can see her or his parent(s) deal with feeling upset in a positive manner, this helps the child feel safe enough to get their own feelings back on track.*

When You're Stressed, do an **SOS**

Step 1: Slow Down (Take Time for Self-Care: Clear Your Mind; Relax Your Body)

Step 2: Orient Yourself (Bring Your Mind & Body into Focus)

- Scan every area in your body for tightness/tension/pain and let this go: *Tune In*
- Use your 5 senses to pay attention to the immediate environment: *Get Centered*
- Focus on the people you're with and why you all are here now: *Social Support*

Step 3: Self Check (How much Distress? Personal Control? *Re-Set the Inner Alarm*)

Distress Thermometer: 1=Best You Ever Felt 5 = Okay 10 = Worst You Ever Felt
Personal Control: 1=No Control 5 = Some Control 10 = Totally in Control of Your Life

And Teach Your Child to Use the **SOS** too

1**S**low Down (Stop Everything), 2**O**bserve (Look, Listen, Feel), 3**M**ake **S**mart Choices

2. Helping Your Child with Bad Memories: *When memories pop into kids' minds, they often don't think about past events--they just know that they feel horrible and want help--but may not know what will help or how to ask for help. Bad memories, or feeling scared, mad, depressed, or not able to sleep, are signs that the **brain's automatic alarm system** is turned on. This alarm system protects us when frightening event happen, and warns us to watch out for bad things in the future--just like a fire alarm or a home alarm. However, once turned on in an emergency, the brain's alarm, is **hard to turn off again**--and it goes off later at small things that aren't really dangerous, because the bad event turned it on so strongly. So what we want to do for your child is to **get her/his brain's alarm system back the way it used to be**. Here are some practical steps you can take to help your child.*

- Observe carefully and figure out what people/places/activities/conversation topics are "triggers" that regularly lead your child to feel upset, and help your child practice using the SOS exercise to feel safer when (or before) those triggers occur.
- If a bad memory or nightmare bothers your child, help her/him to tell you or show you (for example by drawing pictures or telling a story) what s/he remembers about the frightening event. *Here are some guidelines to follow:*
 1. *Kids usually won't remember everything that happened, but what they do remember is important to them and you should *tell them that you understand why it is important to them*. Counselors can help you figure this out. For example, a child may remember that all the lights went off and it was dark, which may be upsetting because the child heard scary sounds but couldn't see what was happening, or couldn't figure out how to get away.
 2. What kids *don't* remember may be important because this may be the worst parts of the events, which kids often can't remember because they're *not ready to deal with that part*. **NEVER** force a child to remember a bad part of a memory because this only makes kids feel more scared or upset. If your child needs to remember a bad part, s/he will do so *when s/he feels emotionally safe enough to do so*, and then *you can comfort your child and help her/him feel safe and secure*.
 3. A second reason children don't remember important parts of frightening events is that these parts may have gotten lost in the confusion of the event. Kids often don't recall, or don't think it's important, that they did smart or courageous things (like getting help as soon as possible, or not making an assailant angrier, or trying to help someone else), because the experience was so awful. You can help by genuinely *pointing out things your child did that were positive* even though the event was awful.

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4. Kids also may not remember that people helped them, or tried to do so, because they feel so upset that it seems like no one helped or cared about them. It's *not helpful to argue with a child* by saying that they should appreciate what somebody did to help them. Instead, gently describe things people were doing to try to help, saying that this may not make the bad event okay but that it's important that s/he knows that people do care about and want to help her/him -- and maybe that can help now.
5. Kids often mis-remember some things, especially in frightening events. If your child is sure that something happened a certain way *it doesn't help to argue with her/him that that is not true*. Instead, you can say that what s/he remembers might have happened, but it's also possible that it happened in a different way (which you can then describe). Kids will hold on to mis-remembered aspects of a frightening experience because they feel upset and confused, not because they are being "stubborn" or not "willing to face reality." Rather than emphasizing the exact events, focus on your child's feelings (scared, sad, confused, lonely, hurt, etc.), *help your child label her/his feelings and see how the feelings make sense* (without agreeing or disagreeing about exactly what happened).
6. If a child is able to tell or draw or in any other way communicate what they recall of a bad memory, doing so can *help her/him to feel less scared of the memory itself*, and that is a big step toward feeling safe enough for her/his inner alarm system to start to be less easily or intensely triggered. The child *does not have to remember everything or tell everything*; it is the act of *remembering what s/he is able to and chooses to* that gives children back a sense of personal control that traumatic events (temporarily) take away. The value of remembering and telling about a frightening event is *NOT how emotional or upset* the child gets when doing so, so *you should NOT encourage your child to get any more upset than occurs naturally* when recalling or telling a bad memory. Instead, the best response from a parent is to calmly and sympathetically express empathy and support for their child. For example, *"This was really scary for you when it happened, and you're doing a great job of figuring out what happened so you can feel safer now that it's over. You did a great job of dealing with it then, and now you're dealing with the bad memory in a really great way too. Even though it was awful then when it happened, together we can make the bad memory stop being so scary now."*
7. Sometimes even when a therapist and parent(s) follow all of these guidelines, a child may still feel confused and overwhelmed by bad memories. Then an additional step that may be necessary is to help the child to mentally figure out the *exact moment or part of the experience that was the worst or scariest*. The worst part or moment is a very individual thing, because each child is affected differently by every experience. For example, it might not be a gun shooting or the impact of an automobile crash, but instead the moment when a child saw a horribly injured person or a dead body. Or it might be something that somebody said, like a threat or a cruel put-down, which made the child feel particularly scared or ashamed. Or it might be something the child did or felt—like letting a stranger in the door or feeling physical pleasure—or did not do, like not calling for help or not trying to fight back. There is no way to know in advance what this "key trauma moment" will be, but if you (usually with the help of a therapist) can gently ask your child to say what was the worst part, children often figure this out (although not always immediately) and then feel a greater sense of closure by simply knowing the worst part. Usually *it does NOT help to have a child remember the worst part over and over again* except if this helps the child know that they can think about the worst part without being overwhelmed. If your child is having a bad memory or a triggered reaction, it can be helpful to say: *"You may be remembering the really bad part of the event, and maybe that's why you're feeling so bad right now (or felt so bad when the trigger occurred), but **that part is over and you're safe now.**"*
8. The **bottom line** is that, if they're having bad memories or triggered reminder reactions, kids need the *ability to think clearly* enough to: (a) remember that *people who care about them can help* if they seek out those people, (b) know that *bad feelings now are their body's alarm system, and it can be turned off*, (c) know that they are *safe enough now to be able to remember frightening past event(s) clearly but only when they choose to do so*, so they do not have to keep thinking about those memories if they don't want to, and (d) do things to re-set their brain's alarms, like the SOS.

When kids are able to do these four things, they may still have bad memories or triggered reactions, but they know how to deal with them and they feel able to get on with their lives and with growing up.