

## Helping Children Cope with the Columbia Space Shuttle Tragedy

### How can parents and teachers talk with children about the explosion of the Shuttle Columbia and the deaths of the seven astronauts?

In the week after the explosion of Shuttle Columbia, children have been full of questions about how and why this tragic event occurred. Parents and teachers grapple with the dilemma of trying to protect children from media exposure to the grim details of the crash and the recovery efforts while attempting to answer their questions. Based on our crisis response and recovery work with children and the important adults in their lives after events of disaster, violence and loss, we have found these guidelines to be helpful:

Assess the questions your child or student is asking. To what extent is the question an expression of your child's need for clarification? How much anxiety is your child experiencing and what are they anxious about? Questions about disasters such as the shuttle tragedy have elements of both intellectual curiosity and anxiety.

### To understand the child's perspective, begin by asking your child to describe how he or she understands what happened.

- **Listen to your child patiently, and gently answer their questions.** Speak in a comforting tone of voice. Keep the explanation brief and honest with information that you think they can understand and handle emotionally based on their age and level of social and emotional development.
- **Reassure them that people are working to prevent this from occurring again.** Personal safety is a concern at every age but especially so for young children. Let them know that law enforcement, aviation, and other federal and local agencies are carefully studying the accident in an attempt to understand and prevent such an event from happening again.
- **Tell them they are cared for and loved.** Your expressions of care and concern for friends and family members are effective in soothing fears. Recognize that their experience of fear is real. Do not dismiss it or criticize it. It is vital for children and adults to know that in difficult times or in times of crisis, that they are not alone physically or emotionally.
- **Spend more time with your child in calm and quiet routines.** Maintaining regular routines provides stability for children. In times of sudden, dramatic and unexpected events, predictability in daily life activities can be an emotional refuge. Smile and let them know you are happy to see them. If you do add new activities, some child development experts suggest playing soothing music at home or during art activities in the classroom. Other recommend reading favorite books out loud to children of all ages.

- **Take a moment to share your feelings.** Adults are role models for children. They look to the reactions of parents and teachers for cues. Adults may express anxiety and sadness but when they also conduct themselves with courage and dignity, children follow their lead.
- **Limit exposure to news media.** Don't keep the television on as a backdrop to homework, dinner and family time. Your television viewing may not affect your sleep or your emotions but children are far more vulnerable to media exposure. Carefully select the programs you want to share with your children. Be more aware of children's reactions to news programs.

### **Give your child the opportunity to help others through constructive actions, events or programs.**

Tragic events often generate positive feelings of empathy and support for victims and their families and a commitment to make the world, our country, our community or school a better place. A constructive activity may be as simple as bringing a can of food to school during a food drive, planting flowers at home, or drawing a picture of how things can be better.

Helping others through age-appropriate, supervised and structured school, church and community events and programs is also an excellent way to help children cope with sadness, worry and anxiety. When children are encouraged to take positive and constructive action on behalf of others, their participation promotes other coping behaviors, boosts self-confidence and supports their understanding that one person can make a difference.

## **Special Considerations**

### **Avoidance, denial, acting out behavior**

Some children have a difficult time sharing feelings. Instead of talking about their worries or anxieties, they may "act out" at school or at home by bullying younger siblings or peers or "acting silly" in class. Some boys have been taught not to show feelings because it is a sign of weakness or of being out of control. In some children, anxiety is expressed in not wanting to go to school.

Ignoring these behaviors will not make the feelings go away. Parents and teachers can help create home and school environments and opportunities for children to speak in confidence with them in a place where they can be assured of their privacy and emotional comfort.

### **Problems with Eating and Sleeping**

Worry and anxiety can interfere with the normal activities of daily life, including eating and sleeping. Children may need reassurance when they wake from nightmares. Leaving a small night light on or placing a child's favorite stuffed animal in the bed can assist with nighttime fears.

Older children and adolescents may deal with disaster or trauma related anxiety or worry by engaging in risky behavior at school or in the community. This can include alcohol or substance abuse, driving dangerously or imprudent sexual behavior.

## Living in Close Proximity to the Crash Site and Debris Fields

Many children and adults heard or saw the Columbia explode and break apart as it re-entered the atmosphere. Children and families who live in the countryside of East Texas and western Louisiana have the added burden of seeing, finding, or hearing about the grim discoveries of shuttle parts and human remains. These are grueling experiences for adults, and are especially distressing for children.

When fragments and toxic material from the explosion litter the countryside, some priority must be given to clearing the schools, community centers, churches and playgrounds where children spend many hours each day. Exposure to the horrific remnants of violent death and destruction places children at greater risk for a range of traumatic symptoms and behavioral dysfunction including posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety symptoms.

## Talking About Death to Children

Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Their expressions of grief may vary greatly, however, especially depending on their age. Preschoolers have difficulty understanding that death is permanent. Children between the ages of five and nine begin to grieve more like adults. Some children may appear to be unaffected by a death.

Children are concrete in their thinking. Answer their questions about death simply and honestly. Only offer details they can absorb. Don't overload them with information. Children can have fears about death and the future. Give them a chance to talk about their fears. Provide reassurance and validation of their feelings.

## When should I seek help for my student or child?

When symptoms persist or seem extreme, a child should be referred to a professional. Teachers should contact the parent and consult with the school site administrator and support staff in order to ensure that the appropriate mental health counseling referrals are recommended. Support staff include the school nurse, school psychologist, pupil services attendance counselor, social worker, or other crisis team members. It is important to note that following traumatic events, the need for counseling is normal and sometimes necessary for healing and recovery.

Signs of persistent or extreme symptoms include students or children who: 1) have not been able to resume normal classroom assignments and activities, 2) continue to have high levels of emotional response such as crying and sadness, 3) continue to appear depressed, withdrawn and noncommunicative, 4) continue to have difficulty concentrating in school, 5) exhibit a possible drug or alcohol problem or other at-risk behaviors, 6) gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a short period of time, 7) exhibit significant behavioral changes, or 8) discontinue taking care of their personal appearance

## Taking Care of Yourself as an Adult who Takes Care of Children

Adults serve as symbols of safety and support to children and also are interpreters of traumatic events. You may also have experienced the traumatic event but have the additional role of needing to support children who are feeling anxious and stressed. In this role you may experience secondary stress. Thus it is important after a crisis, you take care of

yourself. Strategies that help include: limiting your media exposure; seeking out support by scheduling time with friends, family, counselor, or support group in order to share your personal experience; identifying and limiting stressful events that you can control; and monitoring your physical health by getting proper rest, nutrition, exercise, and medical care.

### When should I seek help for myself?

As with children, if symptoms persist or seem extreme, it will be important to seek help from a professional. Signs to monitor include: 1) inability to return to normal activities at work or at home, 2) feeling “out of control” or “off balance” emotionally for an extended period of time, 3) persistent feelings of intense anxiety, insecurity, vulnerability, 4) difficulties modulating your emotions, 5) extreme feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, 6) increase of alcohol or drug usage, 7) or deterioration in personal care.

### Other Resources

Los Angeles Unified School District, Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services. (2002) Expect the unexpected: Building coping skills in a time of terror. [Booklet] Los Angeles Unified School District.

UCLA Trauma Psychiatry Program. (2001). Trauma information pamphlet for parents. [Pamphlet].

UCLA Trauma Psychiatry Program (2001). Trauma information pamphlet for teachers. [Pamphlet].

*Prepared by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, School Unit.  
For more questions, please contact us at (310) 235-2633 or visit our website at [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org).*