

# Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\*

## *Crisis Management in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers*

### **Definition**

A crisis event can happen at anytime. Crises such as a schoolyard shooting, student suicide or death of a teacher, can emotionally debilitate teachers and classmates. If a family or friend has been seriously injured or killed or if a child's, school or home has been damaged or a change in the environment has occurred, there is a greater chance that the child will experience difficulties coping. Whatever the circumstance, the emotional effects on children can be tremendous. These external factors have a direct effect on the child's mental and emotional feelings. This could result in the need for crisis management and intervention.

### **Why do we care?**

*When compared to their developmental peers, children in crisis:*

- Have lower levels of academic performance.
- Are more likely exhibit changes in behavior.
- Are more likely to feel more anxious or worried than usual or more than other kids in their age group.
- Are more likely to have anger or conduct problems
- Are more likely to isolate themselves from friends or family, or have a sudden, new group of friends.
- Might have the inability to concentrate, daydreams a lot, and seems spacey.
- Are more likely to hurt other people, destroy property, or harm themselves.
- May resort to drugs/alcohol to ameliorate the pain
- Are at risk for suicide

### **When is help needed?**

*Help from a physician, mental health professional and/or clergy will be needed if the child or adolescent:*

- Threatens or attempts suicide.
- Has reactions that are so intense that they interfere with daily functioning over a prolonged period of time.
- Re-experiences the trauma through flashbacks, hallucinations, or, with children, a constant reenactment through play.
- Exhibits aggressive violent, or intensely irrational behavior.
- Excessively uses alcohol and/or drugs.

### **What can we do about it?**

*Parents play a critical role in helping children cope with crises.*

- **Be available.** Make yourself available to your child in their time of need without interruption.
- **Cancel other activities.** If you had other scheduled tasks or duties during the time of your child's crisis, postpone them to address the child's immediate needs.
- **Use of open communication.** It is important that you talk with your child openly and honestly. Use of support and positive reinforcement so your children know that they can ask any question on any topic freely and without fear of consequences.

*\*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*

- **Explain why you are concerned, be honest and straightforward.** If you have serious concerns about your child's behavior or emotional state, be honest with them and use examples to help them understand why you are concerned.
- **Listen.** Do not interrupt; do not argue with them; just listen. Let them express the problem from their perspective, ask them how they want to solve it together, give them a chance to find solutions for themselves, or together with you.
- **Ask teachers and school clinicians about available crisis intervention resources in the community.** Familiarize yourself with services within the community who offer crisis intervention services after traditional hours. You will need to keep in touch with your child's teacher to monitor his/her academic performance.
- **Encourage them to talk.** Children feel better when they talk about their feelings. Children will talk at their own pace, you need to be able to feel comfortable talking to them, as they are ready.
- **Hold family meetings.** Keep the meetings lively, but controlled, so children learn that conflicts can be settled creatively and without violence or fear.
- **Provide reassurance.** Your child needs constant reassurance that things will get better and that in the long-term things will improve. Reassure your child that you will continue to be there for them and that you will see them through this crisis.
- **Monitor your child.** You will need to monitor the adjustment of your child and spend additional individualized time with your child.
- **Set routines.** Try to keep usual routines (e.g., meal times, activities, and bedtimes) as close to normal as possible. This allows a child to feel more secure and in control.
- **Special needs.** Allow your child to be more dependent on you for a period of time (e.g., keeping light on at night, sleeping with parents, offering more hugs).
- **Lessen media coverage.** Turn off media coverage regarding incident because it can often be exaggerated or show the most severe scenes/pictures which can trigger stress-related symptoms/re-living the event.
- **Accept feelings.** Your acceptance of your child's feelings will make a difference in how your child recovers from the trauma.

### Key Resources/Links

American National Red Cross. (2001). *American Red Cross materials dealing with unexpected events.*

Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/pubs/dpubs/tewrrormat.html>

- *Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma:* on-line brochure designed for parents and caregivers
- *When Bad Things Happen:* on-line brochure designed for junior high school students
- *Why Do I Feel Like This? :* on-line brochure designed for high school students

American Psychological Association. (n.d.) *Reactions and guidelines for children following trauma/disaster.* Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/practice/ptguidelines.html>

Cash, R. (2004). Depression in adolescents: When it really hurts to be a teenager. *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators.* National Association of School Psychologists. <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/intonline/depression.pdf>

Hamblen, J. (2002). PTSD in children and adolescents: A National Center for PTSD fact sheet. [http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact\\_shts/fs\\_children.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_children.html)

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2005). *Family guide: What families should know about adolescent depression and treatment options.* Retrieve December 7, 2005 from [http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/CAAC/Family\\_Guide\\_final.pdf](http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/CAAC/Family_Guide_final.pdf).

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