

After Traumatic Events: Helping Young Children Heal

(Tips for daycare providers and early childhood educators)

Young children, toddlers, and preschoolers – even babies – know when bad things happen, and they remember what they have been through. After a scary event, we often see changes in their behavior. They may cry more, become clingy and not want us to leave, have temper tantrums, hit others, have problems sleeping, become afraid of things that didn't bother them before, lose skills . . . Changes like these are a sign that they need help. Here are some ways you can help them.

Safety – Focus on safety first. Children feel safe when . . .

- Grownups let them know they will keep them safe. You can say words like “things were scary, but this is a safe place.” If there are ways that you are keeping them safe, share these ways. For example, describe your center's safety plan in a simple child friendly way.
- They understand where their caregivers are and when they will be back.
 - Talk to parents about their schedule and keep a record of it, so you can share this with the children.
 - If some teachers are not in the class, try to explain why in simple reassuring language and let them know who will be there and what they can expect in terms of teacher schedules.
- They do familiar things. A simple predictable classroom routine can help them feel safe.
- They know what will happen next. It may help to describe the plan for the day.
- They are in the presence of calm and caring adults. During difficult times, children often need more adult attention. Just sitting with them and being present can help them feel safe.

Allow expression of feelings

- Young children often “behave badly” when they are worried or scared. Children can “act out” as a way of asking for help. Remember! Difficult feelings=Difficult behavior.
- Help children know it's ok to have feelings and name how they feel: “scared,” “happy,” “angry,” and “sad.”
- Help children behave safely and appropriately. “It's OK to be angry but it's not OK to hit other people.”

Follow each child's lead

- Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need quiet time (like sitting and reading a book in a group or with a favorite provider), still others may benefit from doing a project, like an art project.
- Observe the children and think about their different needs. Work as a team with the other providers to figure out how to meet different needs perhaps by offering different activities.

Encourage emotion regulation

- Think about different ways to help children cope with emotions and weave them into the daily routine. Here are some ideas.
 - Reading books about feelings and dealing with feelings
 - Making meditation jars (see <http://www.instructables.com/id/DIY-Calming-Glitter-Jars/> as an example)
 - Listening to music and singing songs that are soothing and reassuring
 - Doing yoga or stretching
 - Bringing in a stuffed animal from home or a soft blanket to cuddle with

Talk about and highlight strengths

- Community strengths: Give examples of how people are helping each other
- Ways people in the community are coming together to promote healing after the event
- Cultural rituals around healing
- Simple things children and providers are doing that show they care and restore a sense of goodness.

You are important

- You may be focusing all your energy on being there for the children, but it is also important to take care of yourself. Children notice when the adults around them are stressed, and your well-being is important.
- Think about how you take care of yourself and how you deal with difficult emotions.
- Reach out to other team members to provide support to each other and get support from others and from groups you belong to (like a church) when you need it.