


## Speaking with Children About Crisis Situations

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### Stages of Grief

- Shock/Denial
- Anger
- Acceptance
- Recovery
- Reintegration

Note: Stages are not discrete/separate entities and can occur and reoccur in any sequence and over time



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### Developmental Reactions

- ▶ **Birth – 2 years**
  - can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells
  - may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled
  - biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents cope
  - As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event



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### Developmental Reactions

▶ **Preschool – 3–6 years**

- often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event
- lack the ability to protect themselves or others
- they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers
- cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss
- see consequences as being reversible or permanent
- play activities may reenact the incident

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### Developmental Reactions

▶ **School Age – 7 – 10 years**

- has the ability to understand the permanence of loss
- may become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually
- can interfere with the child's concentration at school and academic performance may decline
- may hear inaccurate information from peers
- may display a wide range of reactions—sadness, generalized fear, or specific fears of the disaster happening again, guilt over action or inaction during the disaster, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer

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### Developmental Reactions

▶ **Pre-adolescence to adolescence– 11 – 18 years**

- develop a more sophisticated understanding of the disaster event
- responses are more similar to adults
- may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, or alcohol or drug use
- can become fearful of leaving home and avoid previous levels of activities
- view of the world can seem more dangerous and unsafe
- may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet feel unable to discuss them with others.

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### Every Caring Adult Has A Role!



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### Psychological First Aid

- ▶ Listen
- ▶ Connect
- ▶ Protect
- ▶ Model
- ▶ Teach

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### Free Resources:

- ▶ <http://www.ready.gov/parents-teachers>
- ▶ [http://www.fema.gov/rebuild/recover/cope\\_child.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/rebuild/recover/cope_child.shtm)
- ▶ <http://www.citizencorps.gov/ready/kids.shtm>
- ▶ <http://readyclassroom.discoveryeducation.com/teacher-tools.cfm>
- ▶ <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/manuals/psych-first-aid.asp>
- ▶ <http://www.icisf.org>

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**Guiding Principles**

- ▶ Students need to know and feel that someone is in charge and has things under control
- ▶ School personnel should make decisions based on the advice of internal and external professionals not public or parental pressures
- ▶ Persons closest to the situation are also going through the stages of grief and rarely are appropriate spokespersons or discussion leaders

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**Additional Suggestions**

- ▶ Above all else – be honest. If you aren't, you lose all credibility
- ▶ Remain calm in front of the students
- ▶ Train the adults who will work with or communicate and with the students
- ▶ When possible use people who have worked with the age span they are going to work with

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- ▶ Listen to the child(ren) first - don't explain more than they need and/or want to know
- ▶ Speak softly and use language appropriate to the child(ren)'s age and cognitive ability
- ▶ Make statements of fact about the incident and explain what has been done to take care of the situation
- ▶ Allow time for questions
- ▶ Identify the most affected kids and the most vulnerable/at risk for this situation – use staff students, parents to help with identification

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- ▶ Assign an adult to connect with and monitor each child determined to be at-risk
- ▶ Allow the student(s) to vent
- ▶ Ask simple, open ended questions, when appropriate
  - Can you tell me...? (what you think, feel, are afraid of, etc.)
  - Can you help me understand?
- ▶ Do not continue to ask questions if the student becomes agitated or withdrawn

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- ▶ Check for students who are unusually quiet
- ▶ Return to normal as soon as practical and appropriate - Usually students need normal patterns and routines (schedules, and after school, evening and weekend activities)
- ▶ Maintain communication with parents and establish a means for parents to report concerns about their child(ren)
- ▶ Refer students for professional help, when appropriate

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- ▶ Listen for rumors – Facebook and Twitter
- ▶ Listen for signs of fear, anger, and/or post traumatic shock
- ▶ Avoid telling the child what he/she should know, believe, understand or feel – again ask open ended questions rather than statements
- ▶ Consider whether to use relevant books and stories to help kids work through issues (bibliotherapy)

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- ▶ Consider using play situations to assess young children
- ▶ Assign a team to review the progress of children who you have identified as at risk and continue to monitor all remaining students for a reasonable amount of time
- ▶ Assign additional staff to support significantly affected classrooms
- ▶ Provide information to parents about normal responses they may observe in their child(ren) and signs that would raise concerns

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- ▶ Continue to reassure students that:
  - The adults have the matter under control
  - The event is not their fault
  - That there is no current danger
  - Their feelings are normal
  - The adults will help and support them

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- Risk Assessment Matrix**
- ▶ Assess individual student's risk as:
    - Low
    - Moderate
    - High
    - Extreme
  - ▶ Factors
    - Present at the event
    - Close relationship with those at the event
    - At risk for non- incident related reasons
    - Lacks adequate support at school and/or at home
    - Cognitive delays or behavioral issues

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**Watch for Signs of Post Traumatic Stress**

- › Flashbacks
- › Panic attacks
- › Mood swings
- › Emotional numbness
- › Unexplained anger and/or rage
- › Feelings of isolation
- › Low moral and/or productivity
- › Sleep and/or eating disorders
- › Physical symptoms of stress (stomach pains, headaches, etc.)
- › Poor concentration
- › Feelings of helplessness
- › Depression
- › Guilt feelings
- › Nightmares
- › Drug/alcohol use
- › Increased irritability

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**Post Traumatic Growth!**

- › new and greater strength - resilience
- › deeper appreciation for life
- › greater compassion and empathy for others
- › new values and life priorities
- › greater psychological/emotional maturity
- › better relationships
- › recognition of vulnerability and struggle
- › greater existential or psychospiritual clarity
- › better understanding of purpose

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**Extra Understanding and Patience - BUT . . . . .**

- › Need to maintain discipline
- › Come to school and stay in school
- › Calm down and breathe
- › No one is an island
- › Help is available!!!

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## Follow Up Activities

- ▶ Debrief volunteers and crisis response team members
- ▶ Provide on going support to volunteers and crisis response team members

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### Denial

- ▶ "It cannot be true."
- ▶ "It must be a mistake."

### Anger

- ▶ "How could this have been allowed to happen?"
- ▶ "This is so unfair."
- ▶ "I am SO angry; why did he/she do this?"
- ▶ "No one cared enough; why didn't somebody stop this?"
- ▶ "Why didn't somebody do something?"

### Shock

- ▶ "I feel numb."
- ▶ "This just can't be happening."

### Fear

- ▶ "I wonder what will happen next?"
- ▶ "Could it happen again?"
- ▶ "I wonder what it feels like to die?"
- ▶ "What's my death going to be like?"
- ▶ "If you think about suicide, are you powerless to overcome it?"

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### Guilt

- ▶ "Maybe I could have done something."
- ▶ "He/she did mention something to me, but I didn't take him/her seriously."
- ▶ "How can I go about living my normal life, having a good time, after something like this happened?"
- ▶ "I don't feel sad enough; maybe I should be feeling worse than I do."

### Rejection

- ▶ "My friend left me."
- ▶ "My caring and my friendship weren't enough."

### Betrayal

- ▶ "He promised he wouldn't do this, or she broke her word."
- ▶ "We were so close; he/she didn't care enough about our relationship."
- ▶ "He/she never told me"

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**Loss**

- "Now ,we/I can't \_\_\_\_\_."
- "Does this mean we can't \_\_\_\_\_."

**Blame**

- "This would not have happened if \_\_\_ had only \_\_\_ ."
- " \_\_\_ should have \_\_\_\_\_ ."

**Hopelessness**

- "Life is rotten."
- "What's the use of going on?"
- "If someone like this felt bad enough to kill himself/herself, maybe my life is bad enough too. Maybe I should kill myself."

**Grief**

- "I'm feeling an aching sense of sadness and loss."
- "I'm thinking that I'll never smile or feel happy again."

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**If a Death Occurred**

- Provide information to parents concerning factors they should use to decide if their child should be excused to attend the visitation and funeral
  - Age level of their child
  - Closeness of the child to the victim and/or situation
  - Amount of need to attend expressed by the child
- Go over cultural and religious traditions and appropriate behavior with students who are attending visitations or funerals and answer questions
- Secure and train staff volunteers who know the students to be present at the visitation and funeral to assist students if needed

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- Include students in memorial planning
- Help adults model the grieving process and talk about it with the student(s)
- Consider allowing the students to plan an event to bring the initial response to a formal close
- Plan for anniversary dates and assist students with them as needed
- Remember that children often re-grieve at each new developmental stage

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### Leading a Discussion with Students

- ▶ Ask if they have any thoughts or questions
- ▶ Wait silently and give students adequate time to respond
- ▶ Listen to students describe the event and/or their emotions during the discussion

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- ▶ If students do not respond, ask them to write their thoughts on a three by five card (without their name)
  - ▶ Provide adequate time
  - ▶ Collect the cards and address those that are appropriate to address in a group setting
  - ▶ Compile a list of the range of emotions expressed
  - ▶ Put them under the headers on the previous slides
- ▶ Discuss/introduce each issue using open ended questions instead of statements
- ▶ Listen attentively – your main task is to show concern and identify students who may need more help
- ▶ Stick to the facts of the incident and show concern for feelings expressed

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- ▶ Avoid judging their feelings
- ▶ Invite students to talk to you privately later
- ▶ Be sincere and show that you care about how they are feeling
- ▶ Again reassure students that:
  - ▶ The event is not their fault
  - ▶ There is no current danger
  - ▶ Their feelings are normal
  - ▶ The adults will help and support them

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Thanks to Holly Hart!

<http://hollyhartconsulting.com/Resources/index.html> - school crisis response plan manual and training manual

The source is free and in a Word document format. It can be loaded on most smart phones for instant anywhere any time access.

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