

## Coping Strategies for Children and Youth Following Trauma

When events of great magnitude create fear within us, our children need us to talk with them about what happened. We are often tempted to wait and see whether they bring it up, but silence can be interpreted by children as a sign that this is something that is not to be mentioned. Too, we often think it isn't bothering them if they aren't bringing it up.

You can begin by acknowledging what happened, such as:

- *Nobody every would have expected what happened today, or*
- *It was sad to hear about this in the news today.*

Then move to a statement that reflects how people might feel:

- *I bet lots of parents and kids were worried when they heard this.*
- *Sometimes when something frightening happens we wonder if it could happen again.*

Finally, begin to ask questions that invite your child to talk with you about their fears:

- *What are your teachers and friends at school saying?*
- *What do you think worries the people at school about this?*

Try to avoid being quick to give answers, advice or your own reactions, as this tends to shut down conversation. Instead, continuing to ask questions or simply saying, 'uh – huh", lets them know you're listening. As misunderstandings are revealed, provide clear information. Let them tell you their theories.

The younger the child, the more important it is to be concrete in your language. Call death, death. How much detail you give is up to your judgement.

Youth often regress for a time in the aftermath of frightening events. Behaviour in younger children could include bedwetting or clingy behaviour while moving backward with responsibilities or wanting to be close to parents may occur with older youth. Giving extra messages of your availability, or tolerating regression without criticism, is usually helpful.

Always speak in hopeful terms as part of each conversation. This doesn't mean glossing over their fears, but giving them context and hope.

Protect your children from the psychological saturation that comes from watching graphic television coverage. Monitor or eliminate their viewing. Talk through anything they do see that might be disturbing or disconcerting.

Adapted from Cheri Lovre, 2003.