



Talking to your children about disruptive events

Children and adolescents may be especially impacted by disruptive events.* They often have difficult and stressful feelings during times of change and disruption. It's important for parents to be ready to help if they see signs of stress. This is true whether a child has been directly affected by the events, seen them on television, or heard people talk about them.

How children respond to trauma

Children often feel stressed after going through a scary or upsetting event. They might show signs like feeling sad, having tantrums, or acting aggressively. Sometimes, they want to stay home from school or avoid their friends. Children and teens might also become more aware of changes around them, like being scared of storms, wind, or loud noises. They could

find it hard to be away from their parents or pets and might become quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about what happened.

Other normal reactions, which usually go away after a while, include having nightmares or being afraid to sleep alone. Some children might also feel bodily discomfort, like headaches,

*Disruptive events are situations that cause interruption or upheaval in a person's life. They can interrupt routines and affect emotions. These events aren't always harmful or life-threatening, but they do matter.

Trauma considers how an event impacts someone. Even if people go through terrible experiences, not everyone develops trauma. Trauma is about the lasting effects, not just the event itself.

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stomachaches, constipation, or diarrhea. Their eating habits and hunger levels might change, as well as how much they sleep.

Healing takes time

Healing takes time for most children. Keep in mind that you don't have to "fix" how your child feels. Try to help your child understand and cope with what happened. Some children may need professional help. If signs of stress don't go away after a few weeks – or if they get worse – consider talking to a mental health professional who's trained to work with children. With the right help and support, over time your child will become more comfortable and secure.

How children may respond based on age

Through 2 years old

Infants may react to high stress and trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. It may be difficult for them to be separated from their parents or pets.

How can you help?

- Practice self-care. The biggest influence on children of this age is seeing how their parents cope and take care of themselves.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years)

Traumatic events can make preschool-aged children frightened, confused, and insecure. They may have many questions and limited

understanding of what's happened. And they may wonder why things can't go back to the way they were.

How can you help?

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra effort to give comfort and support.
- Keep close to children whenever possible.
- Let your child sleep in your room for a limited time.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Make a safety plan.

Elementary school children (6 to 8 years)

School-aged children are often worried about their and their family's safety, including any family pets. If family members or pets are missing, they may feel extra emotional distress, fear, and anxiety. It may also be difficult for them to be separated from their parents or pets.

These children may relive or reenact events they experienced or saw on television or online. They may also be afraid that something will happen to them or their family and friends. Children in this age group sometimes ask questions that may not have clear answers. For example, they may want very black-and-white answers about where lost loved ones or possessions have gone.

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How can you help?

- Avoid or limit media exposure.
- Give children extra attention.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out.
- Listen to your child when they want to talk about what happened.
- Encourage your child to express feelings through talk and play.
- Create activities or small tasks that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Explain how people helped each other during difficult times.

Preadolescents and adolescents

Preteens (9 to 11 years): Preteens may have heightened emotions. That's because they understand the reality of the situation but may not be able to imagine things getting better.

Teens (12 to 17 years): Teens may feel heightened anxiety, grief, despair, and disillusionment. They may also express their fear and sadness through anger and shorter tempers. Without clear guidance and a path forward, they may become more withdrawn and sadder.

How can you help?

- Avoid or limit media exposure.
- Give children extra attention.
- Be there to listen to your child. But don't force them to talk about their thoughts or feelings.

- Encourage your child to share what they and other children are talking about.
- Encourage your child to take part in physical activities.
- Support the return to regular activities when possible.

What parents can do

Be honest with your children. Children cope better if parents, teachers, and other adults answer their questions as honestly as possible, support them, and help them work through their experiences. Be mindful of age appropriateness. Young children haven't developed their own coping skills. They depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

- **Encourage questions:** Encourage children to ask questions about what happened. Try to answer their questions honestly. If you don't have all the answers, it's OK to admit that. Promise to give more information when you can.
- **Normalize emotions:** Let children know it's OK to feel scared, sad, angry, or confused. Explain that these feelings are natural in a challenging situation.
- **Maintain routines:** If possible, create daily routines to make things stable and predictable for children. Routines can help them feel more secure during times of uncertainty.

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- **Practice self-care with your child:** Engage in self-care for both you and your child. Do activities that reduce stress and anxiety. Examples include deep breathing, exercise, or spending time with loved ones.
- **Be aware of timelines:** Children respond to trauma in different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event. Others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, then begin to show signs of stress or trauma later. Know the signs of stress that are common at different ages. This will help you recognize problems and respond appropriately.
- **Limit news watching:** Try not to watch too much news. Younger children won't be able to verbally express discomfort. But they may show it by looking away or squirming when they see traumatic images. A good response would be: "That looks scary. I'm glad we're safe where we are right now." Be ready to honestly answer any questions or respond to any comments your child has. But don't give them more information than they're asking for.
- **Limit adult conversations about what happened:** An important way for most adults to deal with a traumatic event is to talk about it with family or friends. But some conversation is inappropriate for younger children. Watch what you say in front of children. Never assume they're not listening or don't understand what you're saying. Children can take bits and pieces of conversations and create misunderstandings that often are scarier than the reality.
- **Watch for signs of stress:** Some children may show a great deal of anxiety, especially if they have a family member who lives close to where a tragedy or disaster happened. Their concern may show up in physical and emotional symptoms like bed wetting, sleep problems, changes in eating habits, fear of being alone, or even regressive behavior. Regressive behavior is when a child starts to act like they're younger than they are. For example, a toddler who's potty trained may start having bathroom accidents. If behavior like this lasts more than a few weeks, your child may need professional help. Talk to your pediatrician for recommendations on how to manage the situation.

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Resources and support

You and your family have many mental health services and resources available to you at Kaiser Permanente, including:

- Classes and support groups*
- Digital wellness resources
- Healthy lifestyle programs
- Integration with primary care
- Intensive outpatient services
- Inpatient services
- Outpatient services
- Preventive care
- Recovery and social support
- Self-care apps
- Wellness coaching

To understand your care options and connect to the support you need, visit kp.org/mentalhealth.

*Some members may have to pay a fee for certain classes.

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