

# **Children and Trauma: what to expect and what to do**

## **by Aletha Solter, Ph.D.**

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### **What to expect**

- Increase in separation anxiety, clinging, refusal to go to school or daycare, resistance to being alone in a room, especially at night.
- Increased crying and temper tantrums, often triggered by insignificant incidents.
- Increased fears and nightmares.
- Increased startle response, hyper-alertness, and hyperactivity.
- Regression in toileting, feeding, etc. Wanting to be treated like a baby.
- Spontaneous play with toys and themes relating to the trauma.

### **What to do**

- Let your child stay close to you. Don't force him to play or sleep alone.
- If there has been a death in the family, let your child participate fully in the memorial service and grieving process, to the extent that she wishes.
- Don't force your child to act more grown up than he feels. It's okay to treat him like a baby if that is what he wants. This will give him strength to face the trauma and heal from it.
- Allow crying and temper tantrums. Try to accept these outbursts of intense emotions without punishing or distracting your child. These are natural stress-release mechanisms that help children heal from trauma.
- Encourage play and laughter about themes related to the trauma. Provide appropriate props (toy fire engine, ambulance, doctor kit, airplane, etc.). Join in the play if your child wishes, but let her take the lead. Play and laughter help children master overwhelming experiences and release tensions.
- Give information in an age-appropriate manner. Answer your child's questions simply and truthfully, but shield him from distressing details. Like adults, children strive to understand why bad things happen. Explain this to the best of your ability, and make sure your child does not think that it was his fault.
- Offer reassurance. Explain what precautions are being taken to avoid another similar trauma from occurring.
- Try to maintain your child's daily routines and family traditions.
- Find help and support for yourself.

### **When to seek professional help**

- If your child purposely injures himself or talks about wanting to die.
- If your child becomes destructive or violent.
- If your child becomes withdrawn or unresponsive.
- If your child has physical symptoms or loss of appetite.
- If your child's fears, nightmares, hyper-alertness, increased separation anxiety, regression, or other symptoms last more than a month.
- If your child cannot function normally for any other reason at home or at school.