

How to Help Children Ages 6-11 when They Have Witnessed a Traumatic Event



Article by [Child Mind Institute](#)

At this age, children are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings and can better handle difficulties, but they still look to parents for comfort and guidance. Listening to them demonstrates your commitment. When scary things happen, seeing that parents can still parent may be the most reassuring thing for a frightened child.

Typical reactions of children ages 6 to 11:

- Anxiety
- Increased aggression, anger and irritability (like bullying or fighting with peers)
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Blaming themselves for the event
- Moodiness or crying
- Concerns about being taken care of
- Fear of future injury or death of loved ones
- Denying the event even occurred
- Complaints about physical discomfort, such as stomachaches, headaches, and lethargy, which may be due to stress
- Repeatedly asking questions
- Refusing to discuss the event (more typical among kids ages 9 to 11)
- Withdrawal from social interactions
- Academic problems: Trouble with memory and concentration at school, refusing to attend

What you can do to help:

- **Reassure your child that he is safe.** Children this age are comforted by facts. Use real words, such as hurricane, earthquake, flood, aftershock. For kids this age, knowledge is empowering and helps relieve anxiety.
- **Keep things as “normal” as possible.** Bedtime and mealtime routines help kids feel safe and secure. If you are homeless or have been relocated, establish different routines and give your child some choice in the matter—for example, let her choose which story to tell at bed- time. This gives a child a sense of control during an uncertain time.
- **Limit exposure to TV, newspapers and radio.** The more bad news school-age kids are exposed to, the more worried they will be. News footage can magnify the trauma of the event, so when a child does watch a news report or listen to the radio, sit with him so you can talk about it afterward. Avoid letting your child see graphic images.
- **Spend time talking with your child.** Let him know that it is okay to ask questions and to express concerns or sadness. One way to encourage conversation is to use family time (such as mealtime) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Also ask what his friends have been saying, so you can make sure to correct any misinformation.
- **Answer questions briefly but honestly.** After a child has brought something up, first ask for his ideas so you can understand exactly what the concern is. Usually children ask a question because they are worried about something specific. Give a reassuring answer. If you do not know an answer to a question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know.” Do not speculate or repeat rumors.
- **Draw out children who do not talk.** Open a discussion by sharing your own feelings—for example, you could say, “This was a very scary thing, and sometimes I wake up in the night because I am thinking about it. How are you feeling?” Doing this helps your child feel he is not alone in his concerns or fears. However, do not give a lot of detail about your own anxieties.

- **Keep children busy.** Daily activities, such as playing with friends or going to school, may have been disrupted. Help kids think of alternative activities and organize playgroups with other parents.
- **Calm worries about friends' safety.** Reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.
- **Talk about community recovery.** Let children know that things are being done to keep them safe, or restore electricity and water, and that government and community groups are helping, if applicable.
- **Encourage kids to lend a hand.** This will give them a sense of accomplishment and purpose at a time when they may feel helpless. Younger children can do small tasks for you; older ones can contribute to volunteer projects in the community.
- **Find the hope.** Children need to see the future to recover. Kids this age appreciate specifics. For example, in the event of a natural disaster, you could say: "People from all over the country are sending medical supplies, food, and water. They've built new places where people who are hurt will be taken care of, and they will build new homes. It'll be very hard like this only for just a little while."