



A critical incident is any traumatic event or crisis that causes a disruption in your ability to function.

Signs of Distress

- ✓ Regressive Behavior- thumbsucking, loss of toilet training skills, separation difficulties, increase "neediness"
- ✓ Difficulty sleeping- nightmares
- ✓ Crying- looking sad or depressed
- ✓ Being unusually quiet or withdrawn
- ✓ Disaster-related fears (thunder, lightning, rain)
- ✓ Lack of Emotional expression
- ✓ Apathy- losing interest in activities once enjoyed.
- ✓ Aggression- acting out, disobedience, destructiveness
- ✓ Outbursts of anger- sudden mood changes
- ✓ Physical complaints- such as headaches, stomachaches and other symptoms of illness

- ✓ Poor concentration, attention problems, restlessness
- ✓ Fatigue- lethargy
- ✓ Increased absences or tardiness
- ✓ Declining school performance
- ✓ A sudden change in relationships with peers- for example- spending more or less time with friends.
- ✓ Sudden onset of hyperactivity
- ✓ Changes in eating habits
- ✓ Feelings of guilt, depression and fear.
- ✓ Feeling "numb" and overwhelmed.

It is important to note that not all children will react to the incident in the same way. Some will display most of the signs- others may display no signs of distress. Each child will deal with a critical incident in their own way and should not be made to feel bad if they do not experience much emotion.

Remember too that while symptoms displayed by children may be a response to a disaster or disaster-related disruptions- they may also reflect conditions that were present before the disaster.

While these signs and symptoms are normal, it is important to recognize the need for additional help if they persist for an extended period of time.

The American Counseling Association suggests that if "struggling persists beyond 4-6 weeks it may be good to consult a counselor."

Who is at Risk?

- ✓ Children directly involved or had the greatest exposure to the critical incident (suffered an injury, had a family member die or get injured, felt they were in danger, or was a witness to a tragic or frightening event.)
- ✓ Experienced major changes in family relationships, roles, and routines- that result from long-term strains or changes.
- ✓ Were struggling academically or psychologically prior to the disaster or critical incident.



But What Can I Do to Help?

Parents often ask, "What can I do to help my child after a critical incident?" This is sometimes a hard question to ask, when parents themselves are suffering loss from a critical incident. Below are some helpful suggestions....

- ❖ Be open to talking about the incident. Graphic details may not be necessary- but reassure your child that it is "okay" to talk about what happened.
- ❖ Understand that your child is trying to make sense out of what they know to be real. This momentary confusion may cause them to revert to earlier behaviors.
- ❖ BE HONEST- when a child asks if the tragic event could happen at their school. "I don't know- I hope not." Is a better response than giving them false reassurances. Children see through such false reassurances.

- ❖ Spend some quality time with your child. Engage them in family activities that they enjoy- like going to the park, playing games or baking cookies.
- ❖ Ask questions. Ask your child how they feel- reassure them that it is okay to express any fears or concerns they have.
- ❖ Keep a normal routine- school, after-school activities, church, and extra-curricular sports.
- ❖ If classmates were among the fatalities at a critical incident, allow them to attend the funerals and be with their friends for support....if they choose to.

It is very important to maintain open communication with your child, not only right after the incident but also in the future. Anniversaries of critical events can cause a child to experience stress. Keep these in mind and be prepared to give some extra time and attention during the difficult times.

Information taken from:

The American
Counseling Association

Information Resources-
University of Illinois
Extension Disaster
Resources



A Parent's Guide



to helping their child
deal with a
critical incident

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