



*Parenting in the Midst of*  
**TRAGEDY**

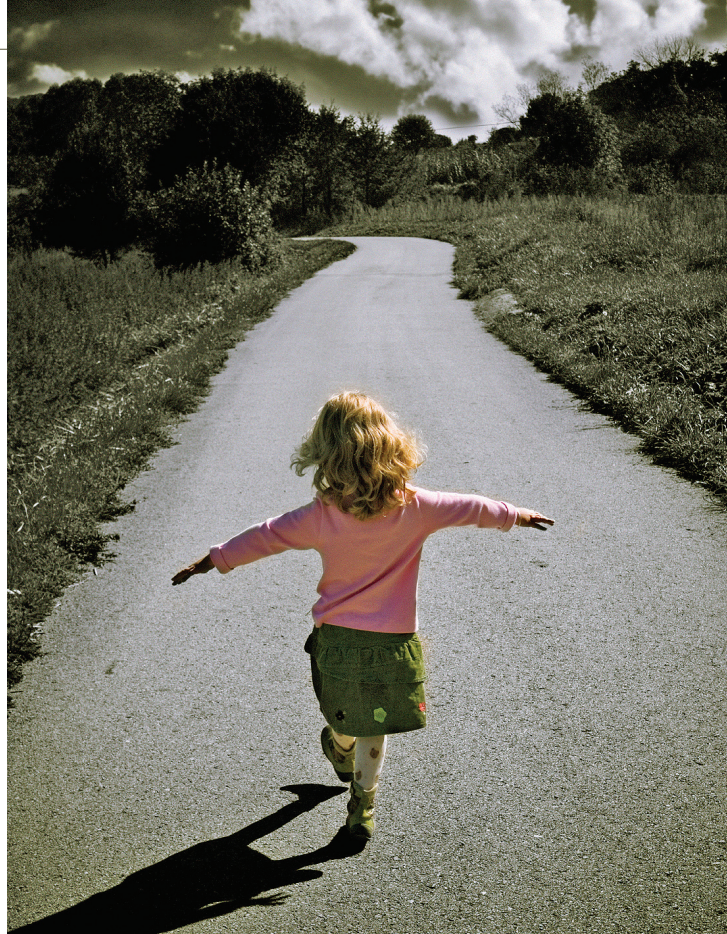


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# Parenting in the *Midst of Tragedy*

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Though, right now, your life is probably filled with uncertainties, one thing is true: The experience you or your family face is not the way you would have written life's script. Something painful or even catastrophic has occurred in your world, and you are now left with the challenge of trying to pick up the pieces and move forward. The ravages of tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires, epidemics, terrorism, war, death, suicide or injury can leave us overwhelmed and confused.



Nothing will eliminate the pain that you or your children have suffered, but there are steps you can take to help your family face those circumstances with courage and confidence.

When a child witnesses or experiences a tragedy, your guidance and input as a parent is crucial to the level of recovery that will occur. Humans were designed to be resilient in the face of difficult circumstances as long as they face the pain. Keep in mind that each child is different—one's personality, past experiences and age can create unique reactions that require specific responses on your part. Observe your child and see what emotional, mental and spiritual changes you detect since the trauma has occurred.

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Here are some suggestions that may give your child the best opportunity to work through the pain of the recent event.





#### **Try to keep your child in a routine as much as possible.**

When trauma strikes, disorientation, doubt and confusion will likely happen. Balanced routine will create a sense of normalcy in a child's life. Right now much of your child's life may feel like it's upside down. But what activities can continue with minimal interruption? Can familiar food be prepared? Can a bedtime routine carry on uninterrupted? Can a child continue school life as before? No doubt, circumstances will require change, but giving thought to how you can maintain familiar patterns will be well worth the effort.

#### **Let children know you are there for them.**

Give verbal, emotional and physical support through praise, hugs and a listening ear. A sense of security will often give your child the strength to face the trauma.

It is possible to do this to excess. If that happens, the child may wonder who really needs the support, himself or the parent. Or a parent may smother with too much attention, and actually create more fear and insecurities in the child.

#### **Have fun with your child.**

As difficult as it may feel, do things that allow you to laugh together. Playing games, telling jokes, or sharing family stories can help lighten everyone's load. Working through the pain will take time, but fun and laughter are a necessary part of the process. A board game, a trip to the park, lunch at a local restaurant, or a good movie together can help put a smile on your child's face. Grieving can't take place in a nonstop fashion—we all need the emotional break that fun provides.

#### **Tell your child that being honest with our emotions is not only OK, but valuable.**

We're each made in the image of our Creator, emotions and all. Use understandable word pictures to present the importance of facing our feelings. For example, to convey the truth of Matthew 5:4, NIV, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," you could talk about bandages. They keep dirt out, but they let air in. Just as wounds are healed by exposure to air, so,



too, hurts are healed when the pain is faced. A child may develop behavioral patterns that lock out the fears or hurts. Social withdrawal, passivity, aggressiveness, rebellion or busyness, substance abuse, etc., may be used to push the feelings away. Such patterns may win the battle but will ultimately lose the war. They may create a false sense of peace for the moment, but at the expense of ever truly gaining freedom from the enslaving emotions.

### **Accept your child's emotions as they are.**

Your child's emotions will vary. One may initially experience shock, disbelief or denial. The range of emotions such as fear, hurt, anger, rage, doubt, depression, hopelessness, guilt, apathy and sadness may come and go. When your child expresses emotions, accept them; don't try to produce a different emotion that makes you feel more comfortable. Generally, if your child is honestly facing his emotions, over time, resolution will happen.

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### **Don't avoid discussing the tragedy with your child, but don't obsess on it either.**

A parent may be tempted to simply distract the child and not ever talk about the tragedy. In reality, the effects of the trauma are still there, they just haven't had an outlet to help the healing process. Be sensitive to what your child needs or wants to talk about—be there to

listen. Parents may unknowingly overwhelm a child with a barrage of questions. The child may experience discomfort from such an approach, and withdraw. You may find that a child talks more openly when sharing an activity with you side by side, like taking a walk, than during a face-to-face discussion.

### **Let your child ask questions about life at a deeper level.**

"Is there anything beyond what we see? Why does God allow suffering in our world? What happens when we die?" These are important questions children may be struggling with. Give them the freedom to raise them. The questions children ask provide a window into the ways they are trying to make sense of the storm they find themselves in. You don't need to know all the answers, but it will be valuable for you to grapple with some of these same issues if you have not already done so. You might ask your children what questions they would want to ask God about the tragedy.

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**Without frightening them, point out to your children that hurt and pain do happen in our world.**

Let them know that you will do everything within your power to provide for their safety. But they also need to understand that there are limits to the safety you can offer. It becomes that much more important to put our ultimate trust in the One who made us.

**Help your child take a step back from the tragedy.**

In the middle of the emotional chaos, help your child gain some perspective on it. Sometimes it's important to step out of the whirlwind and observe our thoughts and emotions rather than living in them. You might talk about what it would be like to fly in an airplane and see the trauma from above. What would you learn about the tragedy from that vantage point?

**Understand that your child may have lost trust in you.**

Particularly younger children will view parents as all-powerful. When tragedy strikes they may ask questions like: "Why didn't my parents keep me safe? Can I trust them anymore?" The more a child's needs have previously been met in a consistent manner, the easier it will be to

regain trust. Give your child small opportunities to trust you before expecting larger expressions of it. Give it time. And avoid the temptation of taking your child's distrust personally.

**Be careful of media overload for your child.**

You may not want to keep your child from all media images, but unnecessary repetition of them can do further harm by creating insecurities and fears. You might read together instead of watching the news on TV. The younger the child, the more damaging the exposure to the images will be. But be careful, older children may look like they can handle anything, but they can also be harmed by trauma overload.

**If for some reason your child doesn't talk freely with you, let him talk to a safe, familiar person about the tragedy.**



Sharing feelings with someone will be a great help in processing the recent event, even if it's not with a parent. Sometimes the only alternative is holding it in, and that won't help. If possible, that person should be the same gender as your child and share your worldview. Long term, your goal as a parent can be to develop a more open relationship with your child. Sharing your feelings will work to develop a closer connection for the future.



### **Accept nonverbal forms of processing the tragic event.**

Not all ways of addressing pain are done through discussion, especially in children. It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Art, games and drama can convey deep fears and hurts surrounding a tragedy that would not otherwise be expressed. Journaling and poetry may express through a pen what would never be uttered through one's lips. Be creative with your child and find ways to express and discuss these emotions. For example, finger painting might give expression to one's sense of confusion about the trauma.

### **Expect the ups and downs.**

Dealing with tragedy has its ebbs and flows. One may be moving forward quite well and then, all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, will get hit with a wave of emotions. Let your child know that such an experience is normal. These waves of grief will come, but if dealt with, they will diminish over time.

Give your child the chance to meet others who have also gone through the tragedy. If someone is not around others who've gone through a similar struggle, it can lead a person to believe, "I'm the only one." It can help to be around others who can share their stories of healing and hope. It's important, though, that someone helps guide the group so that there is a constructive tone to the discussion.

### **Tell your children you love them.**

For some of us, that's not easy to say. Yet, tragedy has a way of showing us the brevity and fragile nature of life. If it's not easy to say, write it first in a note. But work toward becoming more comfortable with those words





even if you didn't hear them as a child. Love has a way of showing us that there's more to life than what we see.

### **Face your own pain related to the tragedy.**

If your child has faced pain, there is a very good chance you have as well. Initially, the circumstances may have required your immediate attention to survival or other details—finding food and water, gathering belongings, moving to safety, contacting family members about the tragedy, etc. You had no time to think about facing the emotions involved. It's tempting to stay in the task mode: "If I've avoided the feelings this long, maybe I can do so forever." But that tactic will fail at some point. It may occur later at a stress point when it's important to deal with life in a rational, healthy manner. As a result, you will probably be less available to your child at that moment than if you had deliberately worked through your own pain earlier.

Hopefully, the way you address your emotions will model for your children a way they can constructively face theirs. Don't overwhelm them with your feelings—children need to see evidence in a parent that emotions can be managed. On the other hand, they need to see pain addressed. Emotions are not the enemy. You may need to talk with someone, write out what you're feeling or even shed tears over the circumstances you've encountered. If you push it down, it will stay there. It usually doesn't stay there but is expressed in less healthy ways. Remember what you've shared with your child, "It's not only OK to be honest with your emotions, it's valuable."

### **Overwhelmed**

Normal, simple tasks that once were commonplace in your child's routine may now be extremely difficult, if possible at all. The child's emotions of fear, anger or sadness may be triggered without apparent reason. This is not uncommon shortly after a disaster. But if your child remains overwhelmed over time, it may indicate that your child is stuck and needs further help. Your child may experience distressing thoughts, nightmares, difficulty sleeping or trauma-related flashbacks that will indicate the need for professional help.

If possible, have a counselor evaluate him. Communicate to your child your availability through your presence. Look at the stress level your child is shouldering. It might



be too heavy. Are there some reasonable ways to reduce it? You may need to temporarily shoulder some of his responsibilities yourself. Be careful, though; you might unintentionally create a pattern of learned helplessness in your child if it persists. Helping your child take gradual steps to regain responsibility may minimize that problem.

### Disconnected

On the other hand, your child may be “underwhelmed,” seemingly withdrawn or unaffected by the whole experience. This can be just as dangerous, since the emotions may be so frightening that the child pushes them away completely. This may be difficult to detect since the child is living life in a seemingly normal fashion. People may unknowingly reinforce the disconnection by praising her strength or courage. But all is not well. The child may exhibit a detached quality, showing little or no emotion about the trauma, and completely avoiding discussion of the past events.

Help your child gradually face what is being avoided. Beyond our dislike of pain, see if there’s a specific reason for the avoidance. This situation may be only one of many pains encountered in your child’s life, and may have created an emotional backlog. It may simply feel safer to numb oneself than address the pain. Show



patience. During a side-by-side moment, you might ask a question like, “Talking about the flood isn’t easy to do, is it?” Again, how your child sees you deal with a tragic event can go a long way toward encouraging him to do so as well. As much as you may see the value of working on it, your child has to decide if she will deal with her own emotions. If your child is open to it, meeting with a counselor may provide a safe outlet for the mix of emotions that need expression.

It would be a lot easier if we could ignore life’s tragic events. We may think, “Just push past it and everything will be fine.” Unfortunately, that won’t solve the problem.

### Create new dreams for the future.

“It’s over; there’s no hope.” Tragedy will discourage a sense of excitement and optimism about the future more





than anything else. Yet, even with as much pain as you and your child have experienced, you can face a new tomorrow. Without facing the hurts, such a thought is merely flowery sentiments. But if grief has occurred, you and your child can look forward with hope. When a forest burns down there's potential for new grass and plants to take root. Talk with your child about new possibilities and dreams. Discuss and write down goals that can be pursued. It's said, "Without a vision, the people perish."

Helping your child deal with emotions with the intent of moving forward is a mark of your love. May you find God's grace to help you with the opportunities that lie ahead. Please call us at 1-800-A-FAMILY (232-6459) and find other resources at [focusonthefamily.com](http://focusonthefamily.com).



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