

## Supporting Children, Teens and Families Post-Disaster

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## With permission from UN General Assembly....

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- Module Components for training
  - United Nations Emergency Preparedness and Support Team members
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## A Special Population

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- Social-emotional and developmental needs of children make them a special population
  - A systemic approach and way of thinking is necessary
  - Children's subjective experiences will be different and unique
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## Event Circumstances Influence Reactions

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- There is no warning and no time to get ready
  - We don't expect this kind of disaster
  - It is hard to understand why anybody would cause harm on purpose
  - TV, radio, internet and newspaper coverage
  - There are no guarantees that it couldn't happen anywhere
  - There is serious threat to safety and life
  - There may be no clear end point to the disaster
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## Contributing Developmental Limitations

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- Less physically developed to escape a situation – more susceptible to injury
  - Have not developed emotional coping skills and strategies
  - Lack of life perspective to deal with post-disaster trauma
  - Disruption to normal psychosocial development
  - Depend on caregivers for physical and social-emotional safety
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## Coaching Parents and Caregivers How to Help Children and Teens

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- How to create safe environments
  - How to provide reassurance
  - Understanding developmental needs and responses
  - Grief and its impact on children
  - How to monitor the child's stress reactions
  - Utilizing stress management techniques for self and their child
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## Creating a Safe Environment

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- Provide a familiar environment
  - Help to create routines and predictability
  - Minimize negative effects of watching the news
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## Coaching Caregivers to Offer Reassurance

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- Reassure that firemen, police and hospitals are doing everything possible to help
  - Explain people from all over the country and other countries are offering their services
  - Allow children to meet with police, firemen, and other officials to talk about safety
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## Educating Caregivers About Developmental Issues

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- Never assume the child is too young to understand!!
    - Listen to and tolerate child's retelling of events
    - Respect the child's fears; give time to cope with fears
    - Protect the child from re-exposure to frightening situations and reminders
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## Play is Children's Natural Way to Make Sense of the World

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- Children are able to express their thoughts and feelings through their play.
  - It is their natural language and way to make sense of their world.
  - It is their work.
  - Providing toys to encourage expressive play re-enactment of experiences and observations helps integrate these experiences.
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## Play & Trauma

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- Traumatized children overcome feelings of insecurity and vulnerability through play.
  - Terr (1989) notes that, "traumatized youngsters appear to indulge in play at much older ages than do non-traumatized youngsters".
  - Opportunity to play for all children must be available to facilitate the symbolic expression of experiences that are too horrible to verbalize.
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## Post-Trauma Play

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- Allows the child to feel in control of the outcome
  - Child can play out a satisfactory ending
  - Child feels free to express and release negative affect
  - Child can exhibit a cognitive reappraisal of the event
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### Charles Schaefer (1994)

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- "In marked contrast with the sense of helplessness children experience during a disaster, play affords them a strong sense of power and control.
  - The child towers over the play materials and determines what and how to play during the therapy session. Eventually, this competing response (power) helps overcome the child's feelings of insecurity and vulnerability" (p.309)
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### Culturally and Developmentally Appropriate Toys

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- Doctor kit
  - Fire trucks
  - Ambulances
  - Police cars
  - Police and fire people figures
  - Building blocks
  - Dolls
  - Puppets
  - Art supplies
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### Lessons Learned....

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September 11, 2001  
New York City, NY  
Kid's Korner – Pier 94

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### Warning Signs

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- Obsessed with violent thoughts of images
  - Suicidal talk
  - Self-harm
  - Rigid, dissociative play that causes more trauma or negative symptoms
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### Post-Trauma Play

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- When post traumatic play becomes secretive, monotonous, and ritualized, this will not only fail to help the child deal with the trauma, but also may increase the child's anxiety.
  - For the child playing, post traumatic play is fun, while re-traumatizing play is not.
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### Posttraumatic Play

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- Unique type of play with specific characteristics (Terr, 1983)
  - Literal
  - Repetitive
  - Highly Structured
  - Self-absorbed
  - Joyless
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## Dynamic Play

- Release of a broader range of affect
- Physically more fluid and less constricted
- Interact with play and others is uninhibited and interactive, varied
- Although literal qualities, utilizes pretend play (not rigid)
- Play changes, or new elements are added
- Play occurs in different locations
- Themes differ or expand
- Child appears emotionally relieved (or fatigued) after engaging in play, rather than shut down or tense
- Make outcome changes (presence of other objects)
- Healthier, more adaptive responses emerge
- Rigidity of play loosens over time
- After-play behavior indicates release
- Out-of-session symptoms may remain unchanged or peak, but then decrease

## Gil (2006): Stagnant PTSD Play

- Affect remains constricted
- Physical constriction remains
- Interactions with play remain limited
- Interactions with others remain limited
- Play stays precisely the same
- Play is conducted in same spot
- Play is limited to specific objects
- Themes remain constant
- Outcomes remain fixed & non-adaptive
- Play remains rigid
- After-play behavior indicates constriction/tension
- Symptoms are unchanged or increase

## Typical Trauma-related Stress Symptoms

- Infants and toddlers (birth to age 3):
  - Fear
  - Hyperarousal
  - Aggression
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Clinging behavior
  - Easily frustrated
  - Regressive behavior
  - Whining
  - Irritability

## Young Children – ages 3 to 5

- Reenactment of traumatic incident in play
- Regressive behavior
- Separation anxiety
- Clinging behavior: increase dependency
- Insecurity
- Anger
- Temper Tantrums
- Fear
- Sleep disturbances

## Helping Advice – Infancy to 5 years

- Maintain child's routines
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Provide additional soothing activities
- Maintain calm atmosphere
- Avoid exposure to reminders of trauma
- Expect regression
- Help verbal child give simple names to big feelings
- Play props
- Avoid introducing new and challenging experiences to child

## Middle Childhood – ages 6 to 12

- Separation anxiety
- Clinging behavior
- Diminished interest in activities
- Strong emotions
- Hypervigilance
- Intrusive thoughts, images, sounds
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reduced impulse control
- Avoidance of places, thoughts or persons
- Somatic complaints
- Regressive behaviors
- Sleep disturbances
- Fear of future trauma
- Sense of foreshortened future
- Difficulty trusting
- Decrease in school performance

### Helping Advice – 6-9 years

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- Listen to and tolerate child's retelling
  - Respect child's fears – give time to cope
  - Increase monitoring and awareness of child's play
  - Permit child to try out new ideas to cope with fearfulness
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### Helping Advice – 11 years and up

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- Encourage younger and older adolescents to talk about traumatic events
  - Provide opportunities for spending time with supportive friends
  - Reassure that strong feelings are normal
  - Help pre-teens/teens find mastery, control opportunities
  - Encourage pleasurable physical activities
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### Most importantly...

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- Be supportive
  - Listen
  - Be available
  - Be approachable
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### Helping After Death

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- Grief is a natural, normal and healthy reaction to loss and death
  - There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve
  - There is no timetable
  - Each person will grieve differently
  - No one can predict how someone will respond
  - Each response needs to be honored
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### Children grieve differently than adults...

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- Depends on:
    - Developmental functioning relative to their age
    - May need to revisit the loss at each developmental level
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### Children cope best when...

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- Given simple, honest and accurate information about death
  - Have a non-judgmental and caring person willing to listen
  - An adult, often non-family member, who can answer questions and concerns with caring and sensitivity
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## Grief Never Ends

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- When a significant person dies, life is never the same again
  - It does not have a magical ending time
  - People don't 'get over' the death of a loved on
  - They learn to live with it
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## Simple Explanations of Grief for Children

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- Change can cause many different kinds of feelings. Some changes can cause feelings of loss when we lose someone important to us. When all these feelings come together after a loss, they are called *grief*.
  - Sometimes grief can feel pretty powerful – like a strong wind during a storm. Other times, it is barely there at all – just like a gentle breeze on a summer day. That's because grief comes and goes.
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## Other comments...

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- Grief can feel different for everyone. It takes lots of energy and is hard work. Some feelings in people who are grieving may cause them to behave differently – grouchy or irritable; or want to be alone for a while. Sometimes they may not be paying attention and are unable to concentrate. Other times they might want to have fun and laugh and forget all the feelings of sadness for a while.
  - These feelings are all a normal part of grieving in time the grief will go away, and the hurt and strong feelings will lessen.
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## How Do Children Grieve?

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- Children's grief differs significantly from adults.
    - Children bounce in and out of feelings of grief
    - Do not sustain long periods of intense grief
    - Not all children are able to or choose to talk about their feelings
    - Primary mode of communication will be through behavior
    - Some children do not react at all
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## Developmental Factors

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- 2 to 5 years:
    - View death as reversible
    - Fear of abandonment and separations
    - "Mommy are you going to die?" –
      - Eventually everyone does, but I take good care of myself so that I will live a long, long time.
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## Burial Questions..

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- Is there a light in there at night?
  - Can he turn over in a coffin or does he have to stay in the same position?
  - What if she has to go to the bathroom?
  - Where does the person go after death?
  - Will they come out of the grave after they wake up?
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### Ages 6-9 years

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- Death seen as permanent – but expect it to happen when you are old
  - Although death is final, it is avoidable if you are lucky
  - Give death a recognizable form –
    - Scary figure
    - Angel that travels at night
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### 10 years and up

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- Death is final and inevitable
  - Teens see themselves as immune from injury and death
  - Talking about feelings and thoughts difficult for teens
  - Death can throw their personal world into chaos
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### Typical Emotional Reactions to Death and Grief

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- Fear
  - Guilt
  - Anger
  - Relief
  - Blame
  - Denial
  - Anxiety
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### How to Respond

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- Be Honest
    - Do not be afraid to say "I don't know"
    - Do not lie
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### Use Concrete Language

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- Use real words and explain what they mean
  - Answer in a way the child/teen can understand
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- Daddy's body has stopped working. He can't eat, see, hear, sing, play, laugh or feel. A person that has died doesn't sleep or get hungry or cold or scared
  - He will never come back. All living things die.
  - When someone special dies, we often have many confusing feelings. You may feel angry, scared, sad, relieved, numb. All feelings are ok. They're neither bad nor good – just feelings to be experienced. It is important to try to express the way you feel in words, writing or talking about them. It is okay to express your feelings through tears or physical activity, drawing or play.
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- Allow choices
  - Expect repetitive questions
  - Encourage connections to support systems
  - Plan to bring up the subject of death and grief
  - Allow and encourage memorialization
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### What NOT To Do:

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- Don't say "I know how you feel" or "Don't cry".
  - Don't try to solve a child's problems or tell them what they should or should not do.
  - Don't patronize.
  - Don't say 'you're the man or woman of the house now'.
  - Don't be afraid to acknowledge when you don't know what to say.
  - Don't disappear.
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### Exercise – breaking into small groups

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- A staff member was killed 48 hours ago in a terrorist attack on a mission where he was posted far from his family. The widow states on the phone she simply can't bring herself to break the news to her son that his father is dead. What would you advise her to say and do if the son was:
    - Three years old?
    - Nine years old?
    - Fourteen years old?
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### Breathing Exercises

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- Safe Place
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