

# Helping Kids Through a Crisis Involves Coping Skills Training

Coping with a major change, stressor or crisis can be taxing for adults; for many kids, such things can be overwhelming. Because children don't have the coping skills that the typical adult has taken a lifetime to develop, helping kids develop coping skills for dealing with crises and major stressors is a vital responsibility that can benefit children and the adults who love them. Rather than merely telling them everything will be okay, it helps to really talk to them and demonstrate how to cope with stress so that they'll know what to do when they feel stress as adults—and when their children feel it. This sets up the next several generations to be more capable of coping.

The following are some simple and effective strategies for helping kids cope with tough times:

## Pay Attention

Every parent knows that kids thrive on positive adult attention. When helping kids in coping with difficult times, it's important to remember this, and give extra attention to kids even if they aren't formally asking for it. It can be especially difficult during times of crisis to free up extra time to spend on kids—the natural tendency is often for kids to get lost in the shuffle—but this is the time when kids may need your attention the most. Here are some ways to help kids cope by providing extra attention:

- **Listening**
  - While this isn't true in every case, it's often helpful for kids to be able to express their feelings and concerns, ask questions about what to expect, and just feel that they're not facing things alone. Sitting down and having a heart-to-heart with a focus on [listening](#) can help kids practice processing their emotions, a healthy coping skill they can use again and again.
- **Shared Activities**
  - Some children aren't as comfortable just opening up about their thoughts and feelings, and can be encouraged to talk things out by getting involved in a shared activity. Many parents of boys already know that it may take a game of catch or even a fishing trip to get their sons to talk about what's on their mind. Girls can benefit from some quiet time with a parent as well. And even if it doesn't involve a personal talk about feelings, spending time with a parent and doing comforting [activities can be great for stress relief](#). Knowing how to engage in calming activities when stressed is another great coping skill to have.
- **Being Aware**
  - Another benefit of spending extra time with kids is that you're better able to see how they're faring and to intervene if necessary. For example, if you see major signs of withdrawal, difficulties with sleeping and eating, or other significant changes in behavior, you'll know when to step in with extra help at home, and when it might be a good idea to consult your pediatrician or therapist. It's important to know what is "normal" for your child so you will be able to detect any important changes in their mood or behavior.

## Minimize the Impact

While you can't completely shield your children from whatever crises you face (even if they're not directly involved, kids are notorious for picking up on stressful situations their parents face, as if by osmosis), you can do other things to minimize their exposure to the stress. This can help them learn ways of minimizing their own exposure to stress later in life—another good coping skill to have. Here are some strategies to try:

- **Turn off the T.V.**

- This is a good idea if you're facing a natural disaster or other highly-reported stressors. With the availability of online, there's no need to have disconcerting scenes played and replayed in your living room. Even very young children can pick up on extra stress from this by noting the stress in the adults around them and on screen.
- **Maintain Routines**
  - When everything seems to be changing (or falling apart) around you, it may be difficult to keep routines intact. However, it's a good idea to try. It can be reassuring to kids (and perhaps to you, too) to have as many things remain constant as possible, so it's worth the effort to have bedtimes, meal times, and other family activities stay the same.
- **Be Careful What You Share**
  - When facing a crisis, kids want to know how things will affect them, and they ask a lot of questions. Not every question asked requires an answer, and many are better off being answered in a limited capacity. While it's not a good idea to lie to kids, they don't need to know all the details of a divorce, natural disaster or serious illness. They just need to know what affects them, what they directly need to prepare for, and what's appropriate for their age. They can learn the rest gradually when they need to know, and as they mature and are able to handle more.

## Show the Way

For better or for worse, when facing a threat, your kids look to you to see what to do. No adult is perfect, but being a good role model for crisis management doesn't require perfection, just your best efforts. And an adult who copes in a healthy way provides a sense of safety and stability for kids and models healthy coping skills to emulate. Here are some ways you can help your children by focusing on yourself.

- **Model Healthy Coping Skills**
  - If you're panicked or overwhelmed (which is understandable in a crisis), this will affect your children's stress levels as well as your own, so now is the time to prepare with [healthy coping skills](#). Try to be prepared as possible. Focus on what needs to be done, and be gentle with yourself. Don't forget to breathe. And spend as much time relaxing with your kids as possible. This will help you *and* your kids.
- **Help Those in Need**
  - Even when you're facing a crisis, you can help others who may have it worse than you. This type of altruism can be beneficial for your whole family because it can provide all the stress managing [benefits of altruism](#), plus a sense of [being in control](#), which can also help relieve stress. Additionally, it can be comforting for children to be part of the solution and to know that other people out there are like you, who may [help them](#) when they need it.

## Empower Your Kids

Above all, remember that you may not be able to change all of the circumstances they face, but you can empower them with coping skills and help them navigate what they face, and sharpen your own coping skills at the same time.