

# DR. RICHARD A. WARSHAK

## Psychologist – Author

---

[< Close Window >](#) | [> To HOME Page](#)

## Helping Kids Cope with Traumatic Events at School

Here are some tips to help your child deal with events at school that are out of the ordinary realm of their experience and cause great distress.

### Understand the Impact of Trauma

- It leaves children feeling vulnerable and helpless.
- Trauma victims feel weak, scared, and ashamed.
- The traumatic memories haunt the victim.

### Don't Be Afraid to Talk About The Event

Whether or not your children say anything about a traumatic event, if they witnessed it or overheard conversations about it, you can safely assume that it is on their minds.

### Encourage Children to Express Their Reactions and Feelings and to Ask Questions

Don't assume that you know what they are thinking and feeling about it. When they do ask questions ask them what they think. You want to learn what sense your children have made of the events. What do they know, think, and feel?

### Be Patient with Repeated Questions

Children sometimes ask the same questions repeatedly. Naturally this gets tedious for parents, but you should understand that the questions are not intended to "bug" you. Rather, such questions show that the children have still not fully understood or accepted the answers. Try to be patient. Children's questions are precious gifts. They bestow upon you the awesome responsibility of shaping, or at least framing, your children's attitudes for years to come. Repeated questions deserve repeated answers. When your children no longer need to ask questions, they will stop on their own. If you tell them to stop asking questions, they will not stop thinking about the issues; they will merely exclude you from their inner thoughts.

### Reassure Them That Their Reactions are Normal

School-age children who are anxious in the aftermath of a trauma often feel ashamed of what they perceive as babyish behavior. They also worry that their newfound fears will never go away. Reduce your children's shame and worry by reassuring them that it is okay to be afraid. Explain that it is not a sign of weakness to feel fear but a natural and protective response to danger.

### Reassure Them That Their Fears Will Not Last Forever

One of the most effective ways to get this point across is to talk about a temporary fear that you suffered and surmounted when you were a child.

### Take Positive Action

Help your children take some positive action in connection with the event. This helps offset feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. For instance, let them participate in memorial services, write condolence messages, pray.

### **Try to Resume Normal Routines**

The sooner life returns to familiar patterns, the sooner children will feel safe.

### **Share Your Feelings, But Maintain Your Composure**

Parents wonder how much of their own uncertainty and anxiety to reveal to children. Children can certainly sense when we are upset. Not only would it be difficult to conceal our own reactions to traumatic events, it would give children the wrong message. We want them to know that when horrible things happen it is normal and healthy to react with strong negative feelings and to freely express these feelings. The best way to teach a healthy approach to difficult feelings is to demonstrate it through our own behavior. This principle is not a license to magnify the crisis for your children and burden them with your own sense of hopelessness and despair.

It is best to strike a balance between two extremes. Parents who take a "business as usual" approach and act as though nothing is out of the ordinary encourage children to distrust their own perceptions. Parents who fall to pieces while discussing traumatic events with their children compound their children's insecurity at a time when they need reassurance. The goal is to show your children how to express strong feelings openly. If you frighten them by appearing out of control, the lesson they retain will not be that it is healthy to express emotions, but that it is frightening.

By maintaining composure while acknowledging the reality of the trauma, you reassure your children that the horrible events have not shattered the security of their home and family. You show them that they do not have to deny horrible realities, but that even when life is not business as usual, they can rely on their parents to retain their roles as sources of comfort and security. This approach simultaneously demonstrates a very important virtue, particularly during hard times: the importance of exhibiting courage in the face of adversity.

### **Recognize the Positive Legacy of Trauma**

Help your children draw strength from adversity and use the trauma to inspire a better life. Trauma's impact is not all negative, at least it does not have to be. When psychologists set out to study something like the impact of trauma, the type of questions they ask defines the range of answers they will find. Early students of trauma were concerned about trauma's negative effects and not surprisingly that is what they learned about. As a result, when psychologists discuss the impact of trauma many convey a one-sided negative view. More recent studies have searched for positive outcomes of trauma and have learned what novelists and historians have known for generations: many people draw strength from adversity. They take inspiration from their suffering. They transcend their traumas and become better people.

### **Watch for Warning Signs**

- Reenactments such as nightmares, excessive risk-taking.
- Avoidance - becoming withdrawn, afraid to leave the house.
- Becoming easily startled or having trouble sleeping.

### **Resources**

- For a referral to a psychologist, click here [to email Dr. Warshak](#).
- Click [here](#) for suggestions of where to get help in the Dallas area.

< **Close Window** >

***Disclaimer***

© 2004-2012 Richard Warshak *All rights reserved.*