



NATIONAL  
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PSYCHOLOGISTS

## Helping Children Deal With Tragic Events in Unsettling Times Tips for Parents and Teachers

### National Association of School Psychologists

Americans and people around the world are facing difficult and unsettling times right now. Concerns over impending war, a struggling economy, and the continued threat of terrorism dominate the news. Although not directly related, the loss of the space shuttle Columbia and its crew adds to our sense of sadness and vulnerability. We empathize strongly with the crew's families, friends, and colleagues. Moreover, the Columbia's mission served as a point of optimism for many people, offering the promise of international collaboration, individual courage, and positive human endeavor.

Feelings of sorrow or disbelief are normal under any circumstances when a tragedy like this occurs, even for individuals—both children and adults—who are not personally connected to the event. These feelings may be aggravated today given the uncertainty of the international climate. It is important, however, for adults not to over-react or filter natural sadness over this loss through anxiety about other current events. Children will look to their parents and teachers for guidance on how to interpret the tragedy. As a result of September 11, 2001, they may be particularly sensitive to emotions surrounding high profile tragedies. Adults can help children by keeping the accident in perspective and providing them positive outlets for their questions and concerns. Indeed the natural support systems of family, school, and community are the most important factors in maintaining a child's sense of normalcy.

Parents and school professionals should assess the emotional needs of the children in their care, but the following suggestions may be helpful in addressing the Columbia tragedy.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe** and so are the important adults in their lives. The Columbia accident does not affect their safety or security.
2. **Reinforce that this was an accident**, not an act of violence. The government assures us that terrorism was not involved.
3. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. It is normal to feel sad or unsure when someone dies. It is also normal not to feel strongly about people you don't know. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective.
4. **Maintain a normal routine and spend time with your children.** This is important during any time of generalized stress and may continue to be so over the coming weeks if anxiety grows over the possibility of war.

5. **Explain that, although safety and concern for human life are a top priority,** sometimes even the best planning and preparation cannot prevent accidents, particularly in high-risk endeavors like space flight. Emphasize that the astronauts knew of the danger of shuttle flight and accepted the risks before they embarked on the mission.
6. **Focus on the courage and contribution of the astronauts.** They understood how dangerous their work was but believed in the benefits of science and space exploration to all people. They serve as an inspiration to us all.
7. **Highlight the diversity of the crew and what it demonstrates about American values.** U.S. crew members reflected the openness and diversity of American society. Our partnership with the first Israeli astronaut is part of a long-term commitment to include others from around the world in our accomplishments in outer space. Representatives from many other countries have flown on previous space shuttle missions.
8. **Connect the crew's sacrifice to those of others throughout history** that have expanded human opportunity by going places and doing things that no one else has done, even when doing so posed a personal risk. (Examples include the early explorers, the pioneers, and other astronauts.)
9. **Emphasize people's resiliency.** Focus on the children's competencies in terms of their daily life and, if appropriate, since September 11. Also remind them that the country has weathered many other tragedies, including terrorism, natural disasters, and war, and has emerged stronger and more united each time. (Resiliency studies following September 11 indicate that people who coped best were comfortable expressing strong emotions, surrounded by caring family and friends, kept a positive view of the future, and utilized problem solving skills.)
10. **Note the healing nature of sharing our feelings.** The country and others around the world have come together to share their grief and support those affected by the loss. This reduces our sense of isolation and vulnerability. We also can do this within our families, schools, communities, and faith organizations.
11. **Create opportunities for positive action.** Take cues from the children as to how much they want or need to do but suggestions include writing letters or sending condolences to the families, designing a memorial activity at school, etc.
12. **Provide activities that explore children's feelings and the strengths of the human spirit.** These can include classroom discussions, informal play, community service projects, and writing, music, art, or drama projects.
13. **Observe children's reactions to ongoing events.** Provide opportunities and create an atmosphere in which children feel comfortable expressing their concerns and ideas and asking for help if they need it.
14. **Limit television viewing.** The media will have useful information in the days ahead but it is important to ensure that access is age appropriate and, to the extent possible, to filter sensationalist journalism.

15. **Keep the lines of communication open between school and home.** Parents and teachers should share concerns and ideas. Schools also should provide parents with information about class discussion, updates on school activities, and tips on dealing with crisis. Parents should also inform schools if a family member has been deployed in the possible war against Iraq. Teachers can be more sensitive to the stresses and concerns of the student and make appropriate accommodations as necessary.
16. **Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or have special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. This also true for children whose parents are in the military or an aviation profession, or have personal connection to the event (e.g., those living near the Kennedy or Johnson Space Centers or who had designed some of the experiments being conducted by the astronauts).
17. **Schools also should ensure that teachers know the signs of children’s mental or emotional distress.** They should know what resources are available, when to inform parents of any concern, and to the extent possible, what children are at risk because of personal circumstances. (See reactions below.)
18. **Be aware of your own feelings.** Be honest about your reactions but in an age appropriate manner. Recognize that you may be feeling stress or anxiety from other world events and separate these feelings. It is critical that adults take care of their needs as they look after those of others. Talk with family, friends, and colleagues. Let another adult know if you feel overwhelmed.

### **Potential Child/Adolescent Reactions to Trauma and Loss**

Most children can put into perspective tragic or sad events that don’t impact them personally. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit the following over an extended period of time. Symptoms may differ depending on age.

**Preschoolers**—thumbsucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.

**Elementary School Children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.

**Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration.

*For information on helping children and youth with crisis, children and war, care for the caregivers, etc. contact NASP at (301) 657-0270 or visit [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).*

*Modified from material posted on the NASP website in September 2001.*

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