

ADOLESCENCE (12+ YEARS OLD)



Families play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and safety for a child before, during and after a disaster occurs. Please take a moment to read through these suggestions on how to support your child.

MY MILESTONES:

(Levine & Munsch, 2016)

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- **Who Am I:** Now that I am considering who I am, who I want to be, and/or how to become my “best self,” you may notice that I have new hobbies, clothing, or interests while I am developing this sense of “who I am.”
- **Relationships are Valuable:** I am beginning to consider how to influence or modify my relationships with others and how to get other people to like me. This may show in new ways when I communicate and interact with other people.
- **Performance is Important:** My identity is formed especially through how I perform academically, my activities, and how I am viewed socially, which could lead to me dedicating more hours to homework, attending school events, extracurriculars, sports, work, etc.
- **Regression is Normal:** When I am stressed, I may return to “childish” behaviors that may seem out of character (for example, engaging in “baby talk,” enjoying childrens’ tv shows, etc.).
- **I Am Not the Only One:** I might feel like I am completely unlike other people and that no one can possibly understand what I am going through: especially not my parents or caregivers. Sometimes that can make me come across as self-centered. Please gently remind me that I am not alone and that everyone has gone through hard times in life, too.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT:

- **The Start of Puberty:** Physical changes (body hair, voice deepening, etc.) and growth during puberty will be ongoing during adolescence. I may need help dealing with the new, hormonally-charged feelings that I have about people, stress, and other experiences in life.
- **Bodily Changes:** I am noticing changes in my body and am developing opinions on how my body looks and functions. Similarly, I may compare my body to other peoples’ bodies: peers’, celebrities’, etc. I may need help understanding the new physical changes that are happening.
- **Privacy:** As my physical development occurs, I may request more privacy or feel embarrassed with my parents or caregivers being around. This increased privacy helps me learn more about myself while beginning to be more independent.
- **Sleep:** It is important for me to have sufficient rest and sleep since that is when my body is growing and recovering from each days’ activities. While I may resist having a regular bedtime or sleep schedule, I still need 8-10 hours of sleep per night.
- **Romantic Relationships:** I may begin to question and explore my sexual identity through romantic relationships, and it would be helpful to have your support in doing this.

COGNITIVE (BRAIN AND LEARNING) DEVELOPMENT:

- **Personalized Communication:** I am forming new communication skills by learning and practicing how to share with you what I am thinking and feeling, how I am doing, etc.

- **Developing Independent Opinions:** While I am learning about the world, I am beginning to understand and form my own opinions, values, and beliefs that may or may not align with yours. Likewise, when I need to solve problems or conflicts in my life, I may or may not listen to your advice but may seek out my friends' opinions.
- **Long-Term Planning:** When thinking about my future, I may begin to think about long-term goals and what I need to do to achieve those goals.
- **Futuristic Thinking:** With each passing year, I am becoming more aware of the future, what I want to do with my life, and the kind of impact I want to make on other people. That can lead to me feeling stressed or under pressure, so please be patient with me.
- **Consequences of Actions:** As I make choices about what I do, or how I do something, I am learning and coming to understand that my actions have an impact on my present experiences, as well as my future and my goals.

MY RESPONSE TO STRESS:

- **Loss of Interest, or Not:** It would not be uncommon for me to begin turning down invitations to social gatherings and losing interest in previous hobbies for a short period of time (a few weeks to a few months). Alternatively, I might become very absorbed in my hobby and practically shut out other people, events, or activities. That could be a way for me to feel like I have some control over my environment and feel safe away from the outside world.
- **Different Sleeping Habits:** I may have trouble sleeping at night (for example: trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, more nightmares than before the disaster, etc.). That could lead to me feeling more sleepy during the day, thus affecting my school or work achievements.
- **Triggers:** Thinking about what happened during the disaster may cause me to feel extra stress. Likewise, I may feel worried about returning to places that remind me of the event (like school, work, activities, etc.) or where I no longer feel safe. It would be helpful to have you (and/or a healthcare professional) work with me to determine what my triggers are and how to manage them.
- **Physical Symptoms:** It is not uncommon for me to feel stress in both my mind and my body, especially when the stress is not adequately addressed. I may complain of physical pain or problems such as headaches, muscle tension, joint pain, or stomach aches.
- **Time for Relaxation:** Taking a break to help me process what occurred is often helpful for me. You may notice me taking more naps or relaxing more than I did before the stressful event.
- **Big Emotions:** Feelings of worry, guilt, fear, or loss over what happened may increase, and my feelings may even overwhelm me at times. Or, I may feel numb and distant from my emotions. Either experience could contribute to me becoming more moody, angry, quiet, tearful, disruptive, or a combination of feelings after the traumatic event.
- **Communication Changes:** My ability to effectively express my fears or worries can temporarily decrease when I have experienced stress or trauma. This might contribute to more arguments between us, I may refuse to do my normal tasks or chores, I might choose to seek out peers' or friends' advice more than yours, or I may struggle to concentrate on my schoolwork or other routines.
- **Alone Time is Helpful:** I may choose to isolate myself from others for a while as a way to avoid talking or thinking about the traumatic event.
- **Gaining Independence:** The development of my independence sometimes makes it hard for me to figure out my feelings or how involved I want you to be in my life. This may result in me challenging your authority or resisting your involvement.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP:

- **Acting Out:** Please continue to give me love, support, and trust, even when it is difficult, like when I am acting out more often, or in worse ways, than in the past.
- **Tell Me What Really Happened:** I will probably have questions about the event, how it happened, what is being done about it now, etc., but I may or may not choose to ask you those questions. Please engage in honest conversations with me to help me understand the situation and process what I am feeling, but only when I show you that I am ready to do so.
- **Listen:** Please offer a nonjudgmental, listening ear, an open mind, and heart that is willing to show patience and compassion. I need someone to be present with me while I process my feelings through art, conversation, music, etc.
- **Offer Appropriate Choices:** Please provide me with choices, when possible, because that helps me feel more in control of my current situation. For example, allow me to choose my after-school activities, what I wear, or how I spend my free time.
- **Connections with Others:** If possible, please help me to keep in contact with my school, work, coaches, teachers, friends, etc. Those connections will help me to feel more of a sense of normalcy and stability.
- **Creative Expression:** Please provide me with opportunities for fun and creativity (through art, journaling, creating music, etc.). I need those activities to help me express myself and make sense of what I have experienced.
- **Moderate your Expectations:** The disaster event may make me feel extra pressure to perform well, not cause more problems, or even experience more physical or mental health issues. Please help decrease this stress by temporarily reducing your expectations for my performance at home, in activities, and with schoolwork. If you seem really upset about my performance, then my self-esteem and confidence can be decreased even more.
- **Ensure Good Nutrition:** Continuing to eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water are two crucial things for me. Maintaining my blood sugar at a consistent level will help to minimize mood swings.
- **Deep Breathing:** If I am having a moment of panic, a behavior outburst, or something like that, please encourage me to take a few deep breaths. That will help the logical part of my brain to reconnect with the emotional part that is working on overdrive.
- **Establish A New “Normal” or Routines:** While it may not be possible to resume my routines exactly as they were before the disaster, please help me create some consistency or new routines in my day-to-day life. This can help with my need for a sense of normalcy, predictability, and safety.
- **Schedule Appointments:** Do not forget that I still need my regular well-child check-ups with my doctor and may need vaccinations in order to stay up-to-date.
- **Self Care:** Please take care of yourself. Rest often, eat nourishing foods, drink water, ask for help, and be honest with others about what you need. If you are well taken care of, then you can take even better care of me.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP:

- **Poorer Mental Health:** My depression, anxiety, and/or other mental health concerns may become worse or more extreme due to the trauma. If I have not had an official mental health diagnosis, you may see depression or anxiety-like behaviors develop in me. If my mental health seems different or unwell for a few weeks after the disaster, then I need help from a healthcare professional.
- **Unsafe, Risk-Taking, or Extreme Behavior(s):** If, six or more weeks after the event, I continue to show signs of extreme behaviors, sexual promiscuity, or other behavior problems that are not typical for me, then please seek help from a healthcare professional.
- **Significant Changes in Eating:** When life is hard and feels out of my control, one thing that I feel like I can still control is what I eat. You may notice that my eating habits change following a disaster or traumatic experience. I may refuse to eat, binge eat (meaning that I eat a lot of food in

one sitting), purge/vomit frequently, etc. Please provide emotional support to me and seek help from a healthcare professional if this happens.

- **Substance Use/Abuse:** If I begin using substances (like drugs or alcohol), or my current substance use increases or becomes substance abuse, I need help from a healthcare professional.
- **Self Harm or Violent Actions:** Expressing my emotions is often harder after trauma than it was before, so that can lead me to be more harmful, physically aggressive, or violent as I try to communicate that I have unmet needs. I might begin to engage in compulsive or harmful behaviors that affect myself or others (for example: cutting, biting, harm to others or threatened harm, etc.). If this occurs, please seek help from emergency medical services if it is an acute crisis, or from a healthcare professional if not a crisis.

(All children develop at their own pace. These recommendations are based on scientific research and trends in child development. Additionally, the information contained here does not constitute medical advice. It is for educational and informational purposes only. Please consult with a healthcare professional to receive personalized advice or treatment for your child.)

REFERENCES & RESOURCES THAT YOU CAN USE:

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