

Tips on Talking to Children with Developmental Disability about Tragedy

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1. Most teaching, discussion, and counseling techniques transfer well to this population – simply remember to work in smaller steps, keep language clear, and shorten time for discussion. Keeping this in mind, you can follow all the ideas about talking to children about tragedy, such as *Tips for Talking to Children after a Disaster: a Guide for Parents and Teachers*, on the Howard website, www.howardcenter.org.
2. Every child with Developmental Disability (DD) is a unique individual. Please adjust your approaches to fit each child's style just as you would for the differences in any population of students.
 - a. Children with DD often have greater skill than other children in understanding and reacting in the moment (as a compensation for variable skills in other traditional academic areas). They are very intuitive. Their “antennae” are always up. Remember to watch for and observe non-verbal behavior. This will give you valuable clues about how a child is reacting to information you are presenting.
 - b. However, these same children are often more challenged in anticipating the future. Therefore:
 - i. Keep explanations clear and oriented to the present
 - ii. Set in place concrete activities to respond, i.e.
 1. Writing a card
 2. Drawing a picture
 3. Sending a group letter
 - c. As with all children, ask what they think or know before giving information. This will help you tailor your response to the child's cognitive and emotional level, his or her understanding of issues, and his or her ability to internalize the information being presented. Example: “What have you heard already?” - or - “What did your mom and dad tell you about what happened at school?” Giving too much information or going into too much detail can overload the child's ability to synthesize the information and cause anxiety or confusion.
 - d. Doing is better than saying when working with children with DD. Combining doing and saying is even better.
3. Children with DD depend on and benefit from pattern and consistency. Please make their school day as predictable as possible. Knowing the beginning and the end of each day is helpful. Always let children know what will be happening next and verbally or visually walk them through the day, especially if you feel they are anxious. It is a good idea to “pre-coach” them on what will be happening after you finish the current discussion.
4. Here are some additional pointers:
 - a. When you are talking about difficult issues, keep surroundings quiet & free from distractions.
 - b. Make eye contact before you speak, and use the person's name often.
 - c. Use clear simple language without too many “if-thens,” dependent clauses, etc.
 - d. Explain one thing or ask one question at a time; avoid strings of statements or questions.
 - e. Have the person repeat what you have said in her or his own words
 - f. Ask open-ended rather than yes/no questions
 - g. Be patient for response – pause → It is always a good idea to wait a few seconds after asking a question or giving a direction to let children have time to process. If you go right ahead with your next topic, you may lose valuable responses and information.

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5. Use of calendars, scripts, visuals, and social stories is always helpful.
6. Please make sure that children are getting plenty of exercise and rest.