

# Helping Children Feel Safe

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**W**e live in an age in which difficult issues—such as divorce, illness, death, accidents, natural disasters, warfare, job loss—threaten the sense of security in the home. However, there are many things parents can do to help children feel a sense of stability, security, and safety in spite of these disrupting influences.

## How Children React

In order to help children cope with traumatic situations, first we must understand how they react to them. These reactions are affected by the stability of the family and the child's age and emotional maturity.

### **Birth to Six Years Old**

An infant may express discomfort from disturbing events by fussing, crying, and desiring to be held. Often, all babies need is for a parent to hold them or feed them.

Young children are more mature than babies. Nevertheless, a disruption in the child's normal routine may cause a six-year-old to feel powerless. For instance, he or she may feel great



*By understanding how children react to traumatic situations, parents can help their children cope during difficult times.*

anxiety over being separated from parents during a natural disaster or in the months following a divorce. Parents can help young children in such circumstances by keeping as many routines in place as possible. They can continue to have family prayers, family meals, and other routines they had before the major change. This continuity helps provide children a feeling of comfort, confidence, and stability.

### **Seven to Ten Years Old**

Older children can understand when something or someone is taken away permanently, whether it be moving from a home or coping with a parent's death. As a result, they may become preoccupied by the troubling event. Their understanding of life has been badly shaken. They might discuss the traumatic event repeatedly as they try to understand how to deal with the problem. They might need help making sense of or expressing their feelings about the experience. Remember, their reasoning abilities are not those of an adult. For example, it is not uncommon for children to think they are to blame for their parents'

*“There have been a lot of changes in my life. Some things that didn’t change were family scripture study and prayer. I love the scriptures and am now trying to read them on my own every day. I like the peaceful feeling I get when I read them.”*

Michael H., whose parents divorced and whose mother later remarried.



divorce. Parents can help by learning what their children are thinking and feeling and then correcting misconceptions their children may have.

### ***Eleven to Eighteen Years Old***

Children ages 11 to 18 may be concerned about events occurring locally, nationally, or internationally. Older teenagers start to realize they are going to transition from living at home to facing the turbulent world on their own. They may become overwhelmed with intense emotions and not know how to talk about them.

Parents can help their adolescent children by doing activities with them that their children like, such as making dinner, playing board games, or playing sports. Parents can also discuss challenging experiences they had when they were adolescents. As parents share their thoughts and feelings, children will feel more comfortable in sharing what they are thinking or feeling. This is how emotional intimacy is developed. Even if adolescents don’t show overt interest, they will be listening.

### **What Parents Can Do**

Parents must first recognize that their children are distressed.<sup>1</sup> Children might exhibit unusual behavioral problems such as prolonged sadness or irritability, increased or decreased appetite, disrupted sleep patterns, an inability to concentrate, or abnormal performance in school. Older children may start to engage in high-risk behaviors such as acting recklessly, using harmful substances, becoming sexually active, or withdrawing from family, friends, and social situations.

You can help by knowing how to nurture your individual children. For



PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM C. OLSON

*“My mom taught me from the scriptures that I can trust Heavenly Father even though I can’t see Him. After the earthquake, when I couldn’t find my mom, I knew that God would guide me, and He did. And though my sister died, I knew that I would see her again.”*

Anny A., a few months after the 8.0 magnitude earthquake in Peru in 2007.

*“I know that adults talk about bad things in life to warn me and help me understand things. But it helps if I also hear about the good things in the world and in their lives. It helps me remember how good life can be.”*

Erica M., who had five family members and friends die within the past 18 months.



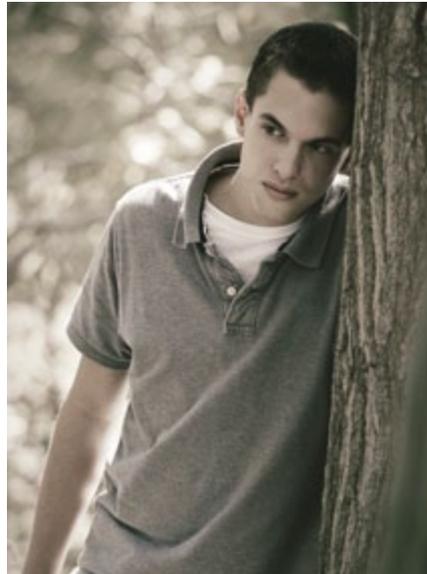
example, you can teach your children, especially when they are young, descriptive words to identify the emotion they are feeling. Some of these words include *sad, angry, frustrated, afraid, worried, and tense*.

If your teenager begins to act recklessly after a traumatic situation, listen carefully to his or her words *and* emotions. As with younger children, help your teenager correctly identify his or her feelings. And be understanding, knowing that the traumatic event may have triggered the reckless behavior.

As you begin these conversations with your children, try to avoid moralizing and expressing anger, criticism, or sarcasm. Identify the hurt or pain your child is feeling and show empathy. You could start by saying, “I know you’re sad that your friend died. I can only imagine how difficult that would be. I’m concerned that you are starting to drink alcohol as a reaction to your pain.” Starting a conversation in a harsh manner rarely leads to good outcomes.

### **Listen with Empathy**

Sometimes you may be tempted to avoid conversation with an upset



*“My dad finds time for us to be together, often when we are doing service for someone else. He takes the time to talk about life in general. And when you talk, you can feel inner peace.”*

Ryan P., whose father was unemployed for almost a year.

child. However, in many cases a child will not be able to deal with his or her troubling emotions without help. As you listen with empathy while your children discuss their concerns, they will feel loved and comforted.

One successful method of listening with empathy involves restating the child’s feelings to be certain you understand them. You may need to help them identify what they are feeling. You might say, “You seem sad and tense when I ask you about your friend whose parents divorced.” Wait for the answer; then allow your child to continue the conversation. Children tend to talk when they feel in control of the conversation.

### **Help Children Process Feelings**

A child’s sense of control can be increased by helping the child to process unpleasant feelings. Often, as you listen with empathy, you and your child will be able to identify the cause of those feelings. You might ask, “Why do you think you are feeling this way?” Wait for responses and listen carefully to the answers. They may not come right away.

*“There are scary, bad people in the world. But my daddy helps me feel OK. He calls me during the day and tells me he loves me.”*

Ally V., whose father is a police officer.



Sometimes you may need to brainstorm alternative solutions. You could ask how the solution your child is considering would affect others involved. Is the potential solution respectful of your family or friends? Is it realistic? How does it make the child feel? He or she may not figure out a solution immediately. Reassure your child that you love him or her and that it is OK not to have a solution right now.

### **Respond with Faith**

As you identify unusual patterns of behavior in your children and then help them express and understand their thoughts and emotions in an environment of love, your children will gain a sense of security and safety.

The most important thing you can do to foster this feeling of security and safety in the home is to build on the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can seek inspiration about how to help your children by fasting, praying, searching the scriptures, and attending the temple. You can talk to your priesthood leaders. You might also consider getting professional help, depending on how severe the problems are.

As you act with faith in Heavenly Father and His Son, you will receive blessings of comfort and support. Children will receive an added measure of comfort and stability as you and they live by the words of the prophets and continue the practices that bring peace into the home, such as family and personal prayer, scripture study, and temple worship. ■

#### **NOTE**

1. See John Gottmann and Joan DeClaire, *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child* (1997).



### **THE FOUNDATION OF PEACE**

“How do we bring that peace into the lives of children who are

growing up in trying, troubling times? . . . The best and most meaningful resources are found within the home where faithful, devoted parents and supportive brothers and sisters love one another and teach one another of their divine nature.”

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Great Shall Be the Peace of Thy Children,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1994, 60.