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COPING WITH TRAUMA

Children experience trauma different from adults. Traumatic incidents may include moving to a different home, losing a friend or a pet, family members who become terminally ill or had died, hospitalization and medical procedures, motor accidents, being bullied at school, burglaries, or being part of a high jacking. Children also stress about the wellbeing of their parents. They become very concerned when they hear parents talk about work-related stress of one or both parents. When a parent is hospitalized it may become a cause for anxiety in children. Children stress when parents argue a lot and / or talk about divorce.

HOW DO I KNOW MY CHILD IS TRAUMATIZED?

Very young children cannot verbalize or talk about their concerns. They show their distress and cry for help through their behaviour. Their eating and sleeping patterns may change. They may experience restless sleep, talk in their sleep, have nightmares or may not want to sleep in their own room. They may show a great deal of anxiety and may not want to separate from the parent. They may cry and refuse to go to school. Children may be afraid of things they associate with a traumatic event. Parents may find that children react differently to discipline and refuse to listen as they always did. It may seem that the child gets frustrated, irritated or angry sooner and becomes upset about small issues. They may become aggressive towards friends or may tend to withdraw. Some children may regress and act younger than their age. Other children may present with behaviour that mimics Attention-Deficit-Disorder or Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder.

HOW CAN PARENTS HELP?

These behaviours are normal for a child who went through trauma. Encourage your child to talk about the event and reassure them that they are safe now. If parents don't talk about what happened the child is left to deal with the memory of the traumatic event on his or her own.

Some children may think their own behaviour or thoughts caused the traumatic incident. It is important that parents tell the child he or she is not bad, it wasn't their fault and they are not being punished by what happened to them.

Children that act younger than their age may be frightened and scared to be alone. Parents may reassure the child without changing their behaviour drastically. Do not tolerate behaviour you would not normally tolerate. If parents give in on discipline it gives the child a strong message that something is wrong with them. Sticking to limits and discipline help children feel safe and secure.

GET HELP

Going through trauma in South Africa has almost become a daily occurrence. Research has shown that if a child receives help within the first month of the traumatic event, symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) may be greatly reduced and even prevented.

Therapists trained in Play Therapy, Sand Tray Play Therapy and / or EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing) may be of great help to a family who had experienced a traumatic event. Find a trained therapist in your area and don't hesitate to ask for help.

RESOURCES:

EMDR with Children. Workshop presented by Reyhana Seedat in Sandton, Johannesburg. May 2014