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### Helping Children Feel Safe

This is a compilation of strategies to support adults helping children feel safe when there is a crisis. There are two different kinds of adults. The first is an adult who may be a helper, but is not experiencing this crisis as a close family attachment. The second is a parent or caregiver in a close love relationship with the child. The strategy to help a child, when “you” the primary adult, are worried or frightened, depressed or angry, hurt or abandoned, sad and grieving means settling the child while holding the fullness of adult emotion. It is absolutely possible for adults in crisis to support children in crisis. It does mean though that adults, when they can, be mindful of their feelings and needs, and seek outside support when necessary. When an adult takes care of their needs it is more likely they’ll have the capacity to care for the needs of another. Primary caregivers are literally and figuratively a child’s secure base.

It is deeply compassionate to notice when a child needs professional support beyond their primary caregivers and friends. Sometimes the memory of a traumatic event will intrude on a child’s ability to move forward and feel safe again. Trauma and grief are experiences and processes that may rattle a child’s innermost stability. The foundation of their resiliency may in fact grow stronger, sturdier. Co-existing or regulating sensations and memories of fear and pain can take time. We know when things are getting better, because a noticeable, sometimes surprising or subtle balance between joy and grief emerges. The ability to hold both joy and grief is a life cycle process which is deeply felt and repeatedly practiced. A crisis can be a time to let other people help support you and your family.

Adults, especially parents, want their children to feel happy and safe, protected from the bad and sad. This adds to the responsive challenge of crisis, because parents or caregivers might think that silence, or limited doses of information protect children. Of course, adults need to weigh information based on the age of a child. A very young child wants information that is concrete and directly related to what they know about their world. Who is taking care of me? Where are my primary love attachments (Mom, Dad, sibling etc.)? Will they come back? Where is my house, and where are my things? Will “it” happen again to me or another family member? An older child may be able to cognitively understand issues of distance, change, and time. They might want a strategy to right the wrong. Writing letters to a government official, letters to the newspaper, participation in fundraising for cures i.e., walkathons, are different ways young people find empowerment through crisis. A preadolescent or adolescent may be able to understand money, job, insurance etc. They may feel there has been an injustice, and want to make the world fair again. Finding groups that represent their issue in the world

is a way to feel control in crisis. Integration of the emotional landscape with the experience helps to blend information, action, and feelings.

The language used to communicate feelings is multi-aged, “I am sad. You are sad. We are sad together.” A powerful message is, “I am here to listen to all your feelings, and answer all your questions the best I can. If I do not have an answer, we can try to find out together.” Daniel Siegel, M.D., pioneer in the field of interpersonal neurobiology, said, “That which is shareable is bearable.” When adults talk with children about the emotional landscape within experiences it helps children to organize and understand their thoughts and feelings. This “knowing” nurtures safety, and trust. How wonderful, the very thing that brings comfort to a child is usually comforting to an adult.

1. Reassurance – Let children know that you are there to take care of them and keep them safe. Children worry that an event will repeat itself, that there will be another loss or trauma, or that something might happen to them. Point to the strategies you and other adults are creating to keep the family safe. This may be as simple as locking doors or wearing seatbelts or as complex as seeking a warm dry shelter. Proximity, being physically close, is very important to feeling safe. Even if your relationship does not have touching as part of your closeness, just by being near tells a child they are not alone. Calm voices, eye contact, smiles, and other warm gestures provide a blanket of security. This holds true for all ages. It will be uncomfortable or scary for a child who has experienced an adult shouting, frightened, or crying. This is not to say that adults should always remain calm. However, revisiting these times with children, when adult emotional reactions have been intense, can help children to emotionally organize the depth of this experience. Children need the feeling vocabulary that went with the adult behavior, and they need to know that adults will take care of them and keep them safe to the very best of their ability. You might say, “I will take care of you even in sad, angry, and crying times.”

2. Observe, Listen, and Reflect – Acknowledgement is important in all relationships. Observing and listening helps adults to get what children are thinking and feeling right. It is deeply comforting to children when caring adults listen to their thoughts, worries, longings, and fears. In crisis, these feelings may take a long time to reveal themselves, or these feelings may be part of dialogue together for many months ahead. Verbally reflect back to a child what you heard them say. Make sure you understood their perspective surrounding the event. Often, children have misunderstood, or are misinformed about the unfolding events. Children might think something they did caused the crisis. Is there misinformation within what they imagine, and what is real? Help children to sort and understand the details. Observe a child’s sleep, play and wakefulness. Is a child’s sleep agitated, or noticeably less or too much? Play can be serious work when it is on

the heels of a crisis. Play is the method children use to work out their inner world and experiences. Even a teenagers' play may reflect a crisis. After 9/11, I witnessed teenage boys with access to blocks building towers. Observation is very helpful when a child is pre-verbal or not wanting to talk. Mr. Rogers, and his mother, talked about looking for the helpers when there is a crisis. Helpers might be doctors or firefighters, friends or family. Include this perspective in your dialogue or play with children. You might say, "Friends are helping cook, and teachers are helping teach all the children." When play feels too scary, you might add, "Where are those doctors to help the people? Here come the doctors!"

3. Ritual and Structure – In the best of times, children love structure. This is how they know what was, what is now, and what comes next. Even an older child can become confused when routines become unpredictable. For the older child, if it's not possible to have a clear plan beyond a day, talk about the plan for the present day. For the young child, "now and next" is enough. Daily routine can be broken down to the morning plan, the afternoon plan, and the evening plan. These plans must include who is where, and when they are coming back. This is reassuring for adults as well. As time allows, create increasingly predictable routine within the day. Tell children what is the same and what is different. Keep children informed as new plans emerge. For the pre-school child and up, when possible, make or use a calendar. The calendar can have who, what, and where, one day to one week at a time. Rituals nourish the memory of important people. Lighting candles, saying prayers, making books, and making altars are all ways to honor people who are dear, or are in your family's thoughts. You might say, "I have been thinking about all our friends and family. Let's light a candle to honor them." Mealtimes are always meaningful to share, settling toward relationship and fully being present.

4. Understanding Behavior – Understanding behavior is important. Fear or sadness can look like anger. Regression with sleep or using the potty might feel overwhelming to parents or caregivers. Separation from Mom or Dad may become impossible. A simple visit to another room can trigger outbursts of cries. When adults look within behavior to understand its function, what the child is telling adults, it is more likely they can be responsive and not reactive. When parents or caregivers are responsive, it tells the child they are safe even when they are worried or sad. Adults accept the child's range of emotion. Parents or caregivers might witness children appearing seemingly indifferent to events. You might witness denial or anger. Adults are clear it is acceptable to feel anger, sadness, or fear, but it is not ok to be hurtful or inflict pain on others. Adults are there to stop them and keep them safe, always. Adults say exactly those words. Sometimes adults worry that any regression they see is permanent. Remember it is temporary, but it is an indicator that the child has an unhealed hurt or worry. A child may wonder who will take care of them. You might say, "I have been

thinking about all the mad and sad things that have happened in our family. You have so many reasons to feel worried. I am here to keep you safe.”

5. Releasing Tension and Calming Activities – If possible, adults settle with children without distraction or multi-tasking. Stanley Greenspan, M.D. calls this Floor Time. Giving children of all ages full attention, without any adult demands, is fulfilling, literally filling the emotional tank. Full attention, when possible, should be daily with several focused shorter times a day, or for one longer spacious period. Full and focused attention is one of the most important ways a parent or caregiver can show a loving calm, giving deep reassurance to children. Children need a certain level of activity based on their nature and internal rhythms. The child, who is full of big body play, may need time at a park, running and climbing. Other children may seek a quieter time to read or draw together quietly. Sand, clay or playdough can be calming tactile materials. Some children love making lists of what is the same and what is different. Some children love making books about where and what the family is doing. Books may include the story of doctors, nurses and medicine. I have been calling these books “Now Books”, because they are simply the story of today. Sometimes, the future is unpredictable. If paper and pencils are not available, then telling the story is just as powerful. Telling the story helps children and adults put the informational and emotional pieces of experiences together. It might be hard to revisit an experience, but when you do, it lets children know that the experience is bearable. You might say, “There was a fire and the house burned. We are living in this house now. We are together now.” For the older child you might add, “When we know what the next plan will be, you will be the first to know. It might take a lot of days.” If there was a long or scary separation you might add, “We were apart, and now we are together. We are all done being apart.”

6. Media – Limit exposure to the TV, computer, radio, and newspapers. This is true at all times. The intention of the news is to be scary and seductive Television and newspapers are too violent, negative, and vivid for children. If you need to be listening for updated information, the internet or radio might be more child friendly because it does not provide the graphic image. Sometimes, the TV becomes a source of passive attachment for children. You might say, “We have a new TV plan. TV is too scary. I am going to keep you safe and turn off the TV. Let’s find different ways we can be together.”

### Final Thoughts

All people experience a crisis or trauma at sometime in the life of the family. It may be divorce, illness, or death. Sometimes financial crisis can have a devastating impact on the stability of family. Natural disasters, accidents, and violence may weave their way into family at one time or another. There is much to worry about. Children feel their parent or caregiver’s emotions. When adults include children, with an eye toward developmental readiness, the truth nurtures a trusted partnership.