Each year in the United States approximately 5 million children experience some form of traumatic event. Millions are victims of physical or sexual abuse, or live amidst domestic violence. Natural disasters, car accidents, life-threatening medical conditions, painful procedures, or exposure to community violence – all can have traumatic impact on the child. By the time a child reaches the age of 18, the probability that any child will have been touched directly by interpersonal or community violence is approximately one in three.

Traumatic experiences can have a devastating impact on the child, altering their physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. In turn, the impact on the child has profound implications for their family, community and, ultimately, us all.

For most children, thankfully, a traumatic event is a new experience. And like all new experiences, the unknown will add to the confusing and frightening circumstances surrounding this overwhelming experience. The trauma may significantly challenge the child’s sense of the world. Very young children may not understand what happened and will be confused or even frightened by the reactions of their siblings or caregivers.

As with most situations, children seek answers and comfort from adults around them, yet we often feel helpless in this role. Indeed, most traumatic experiences challenge the most mature and experienced adult.

While adults do not have all the answers, they can help children better understand the traumatic event and the ways we respond following trauma. The more we understand these children and the impact of traumatic experiences, the more compassionate and wise we can be as we try to help these children.

1. Don’t be afraid to talk about the traumatic event. Children do not benefit from “not thinking about it” or trauma, on Back
“putting it out of their minds.” Don’t bring it up on your own, but when the child brings it up, don’t avoid discussion, listen to the child, answer questions, and provide comfort and support.

2. Provide a consistent, predictable pattern for the day.
Make sure the child has a structure to the day and knows the pattern. Try to have consistent times for meals, school, homework, quiet time, playtime, dinner, and chores. When the day includes new or different activities, tell the child beforehand and explain why this day’s pattern is different.

3. Be nurturing, comforting and affectionate, but be sure that this is in an appropriate “context.” For children traumatized by physical or sexual abuse, intimacy is often associated with confusion, pain, fear and abandonment. Providing a hug, a kiss, and other physical comfort to a young child can be very reassuring. A good working principle for this is to be physically affectionate when the child seeks it.

4. Discuss your expectations for behavior and your style of “discipline” with the child. Make sure that there are clear “rules” and consequences for breaking the rules. Make sure that both you and the child understand beforehand the specific consequences for compliant and non-compliant behaviors. Be consistent when applying consequences. Use flexibility in consequences to illustrate reason and understanding. Utilize positive reinforcement and rewards. Avoid physical discipline.

5. Talk with the child. Give them age-appropriate information. The more the child knows about who, what, where, why, and how the adult world works, the easier it is to “make sense” of it. Without factual information, children (and adults) “speculate” and fill in the empty spaces to make a complete story or explanation. Honesty and openness will help the child develop trust.

6. Watch closely for signs of re-enactment (in play, drawing, behaviors), avoidance (being withdrawn, daydreaming, avoiding other children) and physiological hyper-reactivity (anxiety, sleep problems, behavioral impulsivity). When you see these symptoms, it is likely that the child has had some reminder of the event, either through thoughts or experiences. Try to comfort and be tolerant of the child’s emotional and behavioral problems.

7. Protect the child. Do not hesitate to cut short or stop activities that are upsetting or re-traumatizing for the child. If you observe increased symptoms in a child that occur in a certain situation or following exposure to certain movies, activities, and so forth, avoid these activities.

8. Give the child “choices” and some sense of control. If a child is given some choice or some element of control in an activity or in an interaction with an adult, they will feel safer, comfortable, and will be able to feel, think, and act in a more “mature” fashion.

9. If you have questions, ask for help. These brief guidelines can only give you a broad framework for working with a traumatized child. Knowledge is power; the more informed you are, the more you understand the child, the better you can provide them with the support, nurturing and guidance they need. Take advantage of resources in your community. Each community has agencies, organizations, and individuals coping with the same issues. They often have the support you may need to help you.

The Village Employee Assistance Program is here to help you. Call 1-800-627-8220 to access services.

Editor’s note: This is a shortened version of the booklet “Helping Traumatized Children: An Overview for Caregivers,” and has been reprinted with permission. The entire piece can be read at https://childtrauma.org.