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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD IN CRISIS SITUATIONS



**Listen
FIRST**

Listening to children and youth
is the first step to help them
grow healthy and safe



**STRONG
Families**

Acknowledgements



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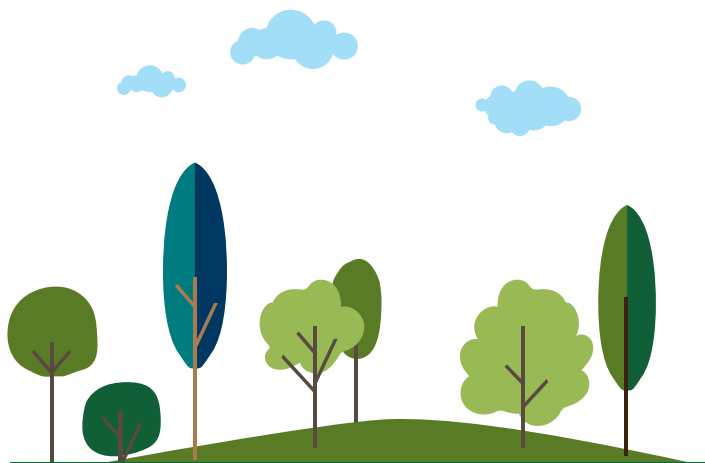
CARING FOR YOUR CHILD IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Crisis situations, such as security incidents, earthquakes and floods, are on the increase and often leave families very vulnerable. Parents that have lived through crisis situations have reported how concerned they are about their children's wellbeing. When facing the many physical consequences of crisis contexts, parents often struggle to know how best to respond to their children.

The information here aims to help you by providing some ideas about how you can help both yourself and your children get through the challenges you may be facing, and how to stay connected as a family. You will probably find that you already use some of the ideas and approaches in this booklet.

Caring adults help to protect children in difficult times, especially when they are warm, supportive, and comforting, and when they can help children make sense of uncertain times. Family harmony helps to reduce your child's anxieties while keeping them safe. Encouraging good behaviour helps your child to cope as well as possible. It also makes it easier for parents to keep them safe.

Remember that this is a temporary state, and you will get through it. How well you work together with your families will help to determine the well-being of your children now and in the future, as well as their memories of this time.



We hope that this information will be helpful for you in caring for yourself and your children. We start by looking at what you might be experiencing, as we know that the way adults feel can affect the way that they care for their children. This may also help you to avoid negative approaches that could make you or your children feel worse in the long run. We then talk about ways of helping your children through difficult times by showing love and setting limits.

As parents, or primary caregivers, you will experience conflicting feelings and priorities, as well as practical challenges. Take your time reading this booklet, and don't try to implement all the ideas all at once. Remind your family that they are your priority. Creating and maintaining good family relationships takes time and effort. Try to remember when you are caring for your children that you are engaged in the most important work of all.

If after reading this booklet you still have serious concerns about your child's wellbeing, seek advice from a doctor or specialist worker who can help.

ABOUT YOU

What might you be experiencing?

- You may find that you become more easily upset or angry than you used to, and your mood may change suddenly. You may be especially anxious or nervous or feel depressed.
- You may have vivid memories of your experiences which come back over and over again. These memories, or flashbacks, can lead to reactions in your body such as rapid heartbeat or sweating.
- As well as concerns for your own health and that of your immediate family, you may be worried about, and perhaps responsible for, vulnerable family members, friends, and neighbours.
- You may be mourning the loss of one or more family members or friends.
- You may fear losing your job or have become unemployed. If your income has been affected, you may feel severely overwhelmed and perhaps depressed.



All of these things may affect how you are able to care for the children you are looking after.

What can you do to help yourself?

- Recognise that this is a challenging time, but it is one that you can manage. Accept the uncertainty of the times ahead. You have tackled other hardships at other times in your life. Use the skills and resources that you have. Try to stay hopeful and positive.
- Recognise that you are not alone in what you are experiencing or feeling. There are many people feeling the way you are today.
- Allow yourself and your children to mourn any losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in how you are feeling. These are a natural reaction to what you are going through.
- Look after yourself as much as possible and try to rest when you can. If there are other trusted adults around you, try to share childcare responsibilities throughout the day so each of you has some time to rest or work.
- Try to establish and maintain structure and routines, such as regular bedtimes.
- Try to keep yourself occupied with chores, work, and activities.
- Try to talk about your worries with adults that you trust, rather than talking to children about the things that are upsetting you.
- Maintain any spiritual, religious or cultural activities that provide you and your family with comfort.
- Avoid any negative coping behaviours such as over eating, excessive gaming, or drinking alcohol to excess. These will increase your stress levels and make your situation worse in the long run.
- Remember that looking after yourself will help make you stronger and more able to look after the people you need to care for.



ABOUT YOUR CHILD

What might your child be experiencing?

How children react to the stress of a crisis situation can vary depending on a variety of things, including their ages. Here are some common ways children react when they are stressed:

- Physical complaints such as headache, stomach ache, fever, cough, lack of appetite.
- Being fearful and anxious.
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, night terrors, shouting or screaming.
- Children may go back to ways that they use to behave when they were younger, for example bedwetting, frequent crying, thumb-sucking, clinging to their parents or caregivers, being afraid to be left alone.
- Some children may become unusually active or aggressive, or they may be shy, quiet, withdrawn and sad.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Even children who initially may seem to not be very affected may at some point in the coming weeks go through phases of misbehaving more than usual and displaying significant signs of stress.



What can you do to help your child?

Crisis situations can present many different complex challenges for families. The information provided below may not remove the crisis, but rather avail helpful tips and strategies for all families on how to get through this period. This information is suitable for children of all ages and you will know best how to adapt it to the age of your own child. In addition, there is a separate section below that deals primarily with caring for teenage children.



SAFETY

Strive to follow reliable guidelines on how to stay safe. If you are living in a risky place, strive to keep your family together at all times. Try hard not to be separated from your children for long periods of time. Make sure your children know their name, where you are staying and how to get help if they are separated from you. If your child goes out to play make sure that they know that they must let you know where they are going, who they are going with and when they will be back. If your children does go somewhere with you, plan ahead somewhere you can meet if you become separated. Ensure this is somewhere the child will know and feel comfortable.

DEALING WITH BEREAVEMENT

The tips throughout this booklet help you know how best you can help your child following a crisis situation. In addition, the information in this particular section is focused specifically on supporting children through bereavement.

Losing someone we love or feel close to can be extremely difficult and painful. Grief is a natural emotional response that you or your child might be feeling due to the death of someone during the crisis that you have experienced. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but you might feel your child is anxious, frightened, sad, numb or even unable to sleep.

Things you can do to help:

- Explain in an age appropriate way what has happened and let them know they can discuss how they are feeling with you at any time.
- Be empathetic and non-judgmental about how they are feeling. Be curious in exploring what they are feeling, but not pushy.
- If you find your child struggles to open up and talk with you, try to engage in an activity together and then start a conversation with them. Encourage your child to open up about how they are feeling. They could draw pictures or keep a diary.
- Talk about the person who has died or been lost, and share any memories you have of them.
- Spend quality time with your child. This will help make them feel safe and relaxed.

PROVIDING WARMTH AND SUPPORT

- Promise your children that you will do everything you can to care for and protect them. Tell them that they are your top priority.
- Be affectionate with your child by giving them hugs or holding their hand. Tell them that you love them. This will help to reassure and comfort them and will help to maintain a positive relationship.
- Tell them often that you care about them. Being caring and telling your child that you love them will reassure them and help to make them feel more confident.



GIVING PRAISE

Finding opportunities to praise children during crisis contexts can help children feel a sense of strength and pride and resilience. One of the most effective ways of changing anyone's behaviour is by giving praise: showing that you have noticed what they are doing and that you like it.

- Noticing good behaviour with warmth and praise helps to build good relationships between adults and children. It also helps your child to learn which behaviours you want to see. Children are more likely to do things when they know they will be noticed and praised. The strategies described here work well for younger as well as older children.
- Children usually love to be praised by people they care about. When you praise a child's behaviour you make them more likely to do the same thing again. If you praise your child for things that you want to encourage, it will increase the chances that they will behave in the way that you would like to see.
- If your child does something and there is no praise, then they may be less likely to do that particular thing again.
- Look for opportunities to praise your child when they have done something good, however small it may seem. Something as simple as smiling, giving a thumbs up sign or drawing a smile helps to show that you care and you are pleased with them.
- Make sure your child knows exactly what they are being praised for so that they learn what you want them to do. For example, saying: **“Thank you very much for picking those things up for me, you are a helpful boy”**, means that your child knows exactly what you are pleased with, and that you would like this helpful behaviour to continue.

- Your child will learn best if the praise tells them exactly what you want them to do more of in the future. For example, **“I’m so pleased to see you doing your written work independently”**, or **“I am really happy to see you playing so kindly with your sister”**.
- Try to give your child very clear instructions. Clear information helps your child to understand exactly what it is that you want them to do. When instructions are given using positive rather than negative words, it is much more likely that they will listen and do as they are asked. **“Don’t put that there”** is negative wording and can sound as if you are annoyed. **“Please put the cup on the table”** is positive, and you can praise your child straight away by saying **“Thank you for putting the cup on the table”**, immediately if they do as they are asked.
- It can take time to get used to praising your children frequently. For children and parents who are not used to it, it can sometimes feel strange, particularly at first. It’s good to practice this on little things in day to day life to get used to it. Simply saying **“I like it when you ...”** or **“Thank you for ...”** can make your children much more likely to do as you ask.
- There are lots of ways of showing that you are pleased with your child, such as a smile, a pat on the shoulder, a hug or kiss, or using a special name.
- Keeping a chart that you can draw smiley faces on when your child behaves in a way that you want can really encourage them.
- These strategies may not work right away. Give your child time to get used to them, and keep on trying.

- Try to be patient with your child and try not to criticise them for changes in their behaviour, such as clinging to you or frequently seeking comfort. Your child is reacting to being bored, to being less occupied, and maybe to the stresses and changes that they are experiencing in their life. Being patient and praising them when they are behaving in ways that you want will help them to feel more safe and secure.
- Encourage your children to help you and other people. Praise and thank them when they do. Children are likely to cope better when they are able to help others. It makes them feel needed and important.
- Speaking clearly to your child and giving clear instructions without being angry is very important. By regularly practising this calm, clear, and positive way of speaking to your child, he or she will be more likely to pay attention at times when it may be essential that they follow an instruction.



SPENDING TIME TOGETHER AND TALKING

- Spending just a few minutes paying attention to your child whenever you can will help them to feel more confident and less anxious.
- You may be very busy with trying to ensure your family have the supplies they need, but perhaps you can spend some time playing together or having a chat. This will make a difference in how both you and your child feel. If you possibly can, make a little quality time for each child in your care.
- Sometimes, when no one seems to be listening to a child, they may carry on trying harder and harder to get attention until someone will listen. For example, this may mean that they speak more loudly and perhaps shout for their parent's attention. The child learns that by making more and more noise, they eventually get the attention they want. By paying attention to what your child wants to show or tell you as soon as you can, you will help them to feel confident and to know that you want to listen to them as soon as you can.
- If your child wants your attention but you can't give it right away, make sure that they know that you will listen to them as soon as possible. This will also help them to be able to wait a little while for your attention. If you can, explain that you can't listen just now, and tell them when you will be able to give them your attention. This will make it more likely that they will talk to you when they need to, and will be able to wait until you can listen.

- Sometimes, when no one listens when a child wants to say something, they may just give up, and not try to communicate so much. It is important that your child knows that someone will listen to them. Try to make time to listen to them and to understand. Ask which experiences are most stressful for them and which are most difficult to adjust to. You know your child best, and can guess the best way to help them talk to you when they are going through very difficult times. Making sure that your child knows that you want to listen is very important.
- Do not promise your children things that you cannot provide. Your children need to know that you are honest and that they can trust what you say.
- Be open and try to give your children accurate information about what is happening. Remember though to keep information at a level that your child can understand, and try to explain in a way that will not increase their fears.
- If you need someone to talk to, look for another adult to share your feelings with so that you can stay as strong as possible for your children.
- Remember not to overload your children with things you may be worried about, such as stress about a financial loss you may be facing, or concerns about loss of property and a sick family member. This may feel like a big challenge, but keeping this in mind might help you protect your children.



ENCOURAGING GOOD BEHAVIOUR

When children behave well, the task of keeping them safe and well is easier for parents, particularly in the chaos that might surround you after a crisis situation. We know that in addition to praise, attention, and listening, there are many things that parents can do to help their children behave well.

- First, it is very important to make sure that your children know what is expected of them. Sometimes children misbehave simply because they don't understand what it is that their parents want them to do. It helps your children learn to be more responsible when they know for sure what you expect of them.
- There will be all sorts of practical things that you will want your children to do, like speaking politely, helping with chores, completing academic work or being gentle with other children. These are often referred to as family rules. You can help your child to learn these by being consistent in what you ask them to do and by praising them when they do these things. Demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see through your own actions is extremely important. Children learn by watching the adults around them. Showing them the right way to behave will have a strong influence on them.
- Family rules help to keep your children safe and help them to behave well. Writing down a simple list of rules for the household can help your child remember them. Positive wording is very important in making sure that your child knows what you want to see, for example, **“speak politely”**, **“be gentle”** or **“keep our home tidy”**.

- It can be useful to think of a small privilege to give to your child if you introduce a new rule and they try extra hard to follow it. For most things you shouldn't have to give a privilege. They should do what is right because that is the right thing to do. But if there is a rule that they are especially having trouble following, giving a small privilege may help them to remember it and to try harder.
- Privileges could be things such as staying up later than usual one night, extra time with a game they enjoy, reading together, or having you take over a chore for them for one day. A privilege should be something that doesn't cost anything. Remember spending time together can be one of the most valuable privilege for your child.
- When you need to tell them to stop doing something that you don't want them to do, make sure you have your child's attention and then tell them very simply what it is that you want them to stop, and what you want them to do instead. For example, you might say, **"Stop shouting and speak in a quiet voice"**. If your child stops what they are doing, thank them using a clear and straightforward comment such as **"Thank you for speaking quietly when I asked you to."**
- Explain to children and adults in the house that the changed situation makes it even more important that everyone uses **"kind words"** (and/ or "kind voices"). This can then be a useful phrase to remind both adults and children if their voices or criticisms start to escalate.



FIGHTING AND AGGRESSION

One of the common changes that parents notice in their children during times of crisis and change can be an increase in fighting and aggression. The place that you are living, and experiences that the child has had, can affect the way that they behave. Experiencing or seeing violence may make children more likely to show these sorts of behaviours themselves. Sometimes something may remind them of something that has upset them, and this may cause them to show aggressive behaviour. They may re-play aggression that they have seen.

This is a normal reaction to the changes that your children are going through, and the anxiety they may feel, but it can be upsetting and worrying for parents. The daily activities of your child and the way that parents communicate with them can affect the way that they behave.



A good way to prevent fighting and aggression in the household is to have clear rules about what is and is not allowed. Writing these rules down and discussing them with your children is a good way of showing what the rules are. Saying what you want your child to do is very important. For example, rather than saying **“No fighting”** you could say something like **“Keep your hands and feet to yourself”** or, instead of saying **“No shouting”** this can be positively worded as **“Speak in a quiet voice”**. Being clear about these positive rules, and praising children for doing as they are told, helps your children learn how you expect them to behave.

Having a list of academic and play activities prepared to keep your children busy will help too. When your children are fighting, the first priority is to ensure their safety. If children in your care are fighting, tell them firmly to stop immediately, and then tell them clearly what they should be doing instead.

If there is a fight between a child in your care and someone else’s child, you will need to step in and protect your child. Then, you will need to consider speaking to the other parent about how to manage the children. Your child needs your protection, but you should not allow them to harm other children and they need to have clear limits for their behaviour.

It is very important for parents to be fair in the way that they use these approaches to address aggression between their children. With older children, finding a time later on when you are both calm to discuss the fighting can be helpful. Understanding the reasons that they got into the fight should help the parent to give appropriate advice.

Explaining your beliefs and what you value as important while your child is calm will help to build their understanding of appropriate ways to behave and react.

MAINTAINING ROUTINE

When you have been through a crisis situation and have experienced so much change, it can be difficult to keep household routines going. If you have a large family this may be even more challenging. However difficult life is at the moment, routines can be helpful. Routines can help to give structure to the day for the whole family. This sense of knowing what is going to happen can help your children feel safer.

Try to keep to some everyday routine as much as you can.

For example, if you are able to keep to a plan when it is time to go to bed, this can help children sleep better. Plan the time each evening when you would like your child to go to bed. Think about what you can do, as far as is possible, to make the same things happen each evening in a particular order so that your child has settled down and is ready to sleep. For example taking time to sit together, telling stories or singing songs can be a good way to do this. If your daily activities have changed a lot, involve your children in working out a new routine with a daily plan including any learning-based activities, routine family events, and daily exercise.

- Encourage your children to do schoolwork (reading, maths, and writing), even if there is no regular school at the moment. This will help them to learn and will also keep them busy.

- Encourage your children to keep a diary, even if they only add an entry every few days, in which they record their reflections, including the things that they have enjoyed during this time. For younger children, this could have a more structured approach, such as “**Today I learned about ...**”, “**Today I read/drew/made ...**”, “**Today I tried ... for the first time**”, “**Tomorrow I look forward to ...**”. Older children might like to create a “**vlog**” to chronicle their experiences. Make sure that you suggest that they make this for themselves, rather than sharing what they vlog on the internet without their permission.



ENCOURAGING PLAY

Play is important in helping your children relax. It is also an opportunity for them to work through past and current stress and to help them prepare for the future. Encourage your child to play with you, their siblings, or anyone else you trust around you during this time. It helps to maintain some normality in their lives.

You can help your younger child's development by finding moments to play with them. Just finding a few minutes to play, or for older children, to talk with them, also helps to build your relationship. When you play with your child, try to watch what they are doing and show an interest, rather than trying to tell them what to do. Your child will appreciate it if they can tell you what to do for a change! Let them guide you on how you can help them in their play. Tell them what you like about the way they are playing. For example, you could say **"I like the picture you're drawing. Tell me about it"**.



FEARS, ANXIETIES, AND AND NIGHT DISTURBANCES

Fears, anxieties, and night disturbances are very common reactions for children who have experienced crisis situations. Some children may initially seem very well, but as the weeks progress they may later become distressed. Using the positive approaches that we have described can help to make your children feel more confident and reduce their fears.

Warmth, praise, and providing as much safety and predictability as possible are very helpful for them. Fears and anxieties may lead to sleep difficulties such as nightmares and wetting their beds. Remember that it is not possible for your child to control these things, so it is important to take a gentle approach and not make your child more anxious by showing that you find these night disturbances troublesome.

If they are wetting their bed, check for any obvious changes that you can make. For example, are they afraid to get up in the night if they need to urinate? Think through the evening and nighttime routines for changes which could help. Make sure that they have enough to drink during the day, as this can affect the bladder. Restricting drinks during the day may actually make them more likely to wet the bed. Keeping a chart of dry nights and praising your child for these may help.

Because of the current situation, you may not be able to make promises for the future, but you can assure your children that you will take the best possible care of them that you can, and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe. If you have serious concerns, see if you can get advice from a doctor or specialist worker who can help.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

At this time of uncertainty, children are looking to their parents for stability and reassurance that everything will be fine. Thus, it is important that your children aren't adversely impacted by the daily stresses that adults might be experiencing. Reach out for advice or support if either you, or the children in your care, are facing any difficulties at home.

It is important that you spend time doing things that help you feel relaxed. To be able to care for your children appropriately, you must also spend time caring for yourself. For some people, this could be by maintaining exercise habits, or by keeping up spiritual, religious or cultural activities. For others, it may be spending time in a room alone or reading.

The way you breathe affects your whole body, yet when you are worried and anxious your body may become tense and your breathing may speed up. You can use breathing techniques to help you calm down when you are feeling stressed or worried. Slow, deep breathing is a good way to reduce tension, feel relaxed, and reduce stress. To practice deep breathing you could try the following:

- Start by dropping your hands below your waist, keeping your palms facing up. Slowly raise your hands as you breathe in through your nose. Stop when your hands are about shoulder level. Slowly lower your hands as you breathe out through your mouth.
- The key thing you should aim for is to breathe deeply from your abdomen.

- Try practicing this for two to three minutes. The more slowly you do this, and the more attention you pay to taking deep breaths, the more relaxed you should feel.
- Your children can also greatly benefit from learning these breathing techniques and using them when they feel stressed or anxious. You might like to try teaching them and practicing deep breathing together.
- Avoid any negative coping behaviours such as over-eating or excess alcohol drinking.
- These will increase your stress levels and make your situation worse in the long run. The close proximity you may now have with your children might mean that they can see and hear what you are doing more than usual. You may be their biggest influence in how they deal with this period.
- Remember to role play how you would want your children to behave.



CARING FOR TEENAGERS

All the tips in this booklet are applicable to caring for teenage children too. At the same time, it is important to recognise and accept that the teenage years often bring various emotional and physical challenges for children that should be accommodated and sensitively dealt with. This helps to make caring for teenagers easier and healthier for both of you.

- It is normal and healthy for older children or teenagers to want some time away from you. This desire can make this time especially hard for them and for you as you may feel you have to keep your children close to you. If it is safe and allowed for them to go for a short daily walk alone, then encourage this. Otherwise talk to your children about how they can have some time away from family activities and tasks. Try to reach an agreement that they are happy with.
- Be understanding that they likely have a lot of access to news about the crisis situation you have experienced through phones and social media. They may be feeling anxious about their health and their future.



- Older children may particularly desire to be with friends and look for independence. Allow and encourage them to keep in touch. Putting phones away before bedtime will help you ensure that they are getting the sleep they need.

- To avoid conflict between parents and older children, try to allow your older children to take control and responsibility of their learning or daily routine, and look for opportunities to praise them in how they are coping.
- Teenagers need a stimulating environment to thrive in their learning and development. Do what you can now during this time to teach them how to safely take more responsibility around the home or living space. Involve them, where appropriate, in any community work, such as clean up projects or helping others in their community.
- Have realistic expectations of your children. There will be some good days and some bad days for all of you during this time. Your teenager may push the limits you set. Try to react calmly and rationally if this happens. This may be particularly hard as you may already be stressed. Stepping away to cool down if you are feeling angry or frustrated and coming back to speak to your child when you have calmed down will help to maintain a respectful and healthy relationship.
- When possible, spend frequent, small amounts of time with your teenagers. This can be just as beneficial as longer periods that are less frequent. Maybe you could build some moments into your daily schedule to just sit and talk with your teenager to check on how they are feeling.

STAYING CONNECTED WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

- Feeling isolated and far away from friends and family due to the effects of a crisis situation can be challenging for every family member, no matter their age. Often, it can help to realise that you are not the only one experiencing this struggle - many others are, too. One way to ease the loneliness could be by connecting with friends and family.
- You may try to build set times into your daily routines for your children to connect with their friends and relatives. This is also a great way to support vulnerable family members such as elderly grandparents who may also be feeling lonely.



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For more parenting tips including from our partners in WHO UNICEF CDC and the partnership to end violence against children:



www.unodc.org/listenfirst/en/covid_parents.html