



Helping Children Cope with Difficult Issues

Communication Tips for Parents and Teachers

Children may be confused by what they hear when difficult issues arise at school. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children cope by listening, acknowledging and validating feelings and by being reassuring.

Follow, don't lead. Make time to talk, but don't force discussion with children who don't feel the need to discuss the issue. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

Answer their questions. Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate- young children need brief, simple information that is balanced with reassurances that the daily routines of their lives will not change

Acknowledge and validate their feelings. Regardless of what emotion is being expressed, it is important for children to feel heard and believe that their feelings are accepted. As feelings are discussed, help children put their feelings into perspective.

Be ready for your own reactions. Parents also have a range of emotional reactions when faced with a difficult situation. Typically there are two types of general reactions. Parents may be surprised/ shocked or numbed by the information and may wish to avoid thinking about or discussing the issue or they may become preoccupied and struggle to make sense of it. The range of feelings from anger, worry, guilt, helplessness are normal and may persist for some time. However, children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives, so it is important to be aware of emotional reactions and model positive coping strategies.

Reassure children that they are safe. Emphasize that schools are very safe. Review safety precautions and review a plan for whom to talk to about any concerns they may have.