Helping Children Cope With Violence

When children experience or witness a traumatic or violent event, they may not react to it immediately. In fact, in some cases it may be days or even weeks later that emotional reactions such as fear, anger, depression, or withdrawal appear. Some may overcome their worries and bad memories with the passage of time and with emotional support.

Others may experience long-term effects from the emotional trauma—serious emotional distress caused by such things as experiencing or witnessing a violent event or natural disaster, losing a friend or family member, or being separated from parents at an early age.

The August 2, 2000, issue of JAMA includes an article about adult women who experience stress as the result of sexual or physical abuse they experienced when they were children.

REATIONS TO TRAUMA:

Reactions to trauma may appear immediately after the traumatic event, but in some cases these reactions may appear days or weeks later. Everyone, including children and adolescents, reacts to stress in different ways. The following are just some examples of possible reactions:

**Children 5 years old and younger may:**
- Have a persistent fear of being separated from parents or caregivers or be excessively clingy
- Cry, whimper, or scream
- Have problems sleeping or have nightmares

**Along with the reactions above, children 6 to 11 years old may also:**
- Have regressive behavior (children return to behavior that is not appropriate for their age, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or being afraid of the dark)
- Have irrational fears
- Be irritable
- Have outbursts of anger and fighting
- Become depressed, anxious, have feelings of guilt, or become emotionally numb
- Get lower grades at school

**Along with the reactions above, adolescents 12 to 17 years old may also:**
- Have flashbacks
- Avoid any reminders of the traumatic event
- Abuse drugs such as alcohol
- Have suicidal thoughts

For more information:

- National Institute of Mental Health
  800/421-4211 or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Web site
  www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
  Public Information
  3615 Wisconsin Ave NW
  Washington, DC 20016
  202-966-7300 or www.aacap.org

Inform yourself:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA’s Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.