When a tragedy involving a child occurs your first concern may be with your children, and helping them cope with their reactions to the tragedy. Second, but no less important, adults should be concerned about their own feelings and reactions to the event, and how these can be handled appropriately.

Possible Children’s Reactions
Children are often reluctant to discuss a tragedy but they will need to talk about what happened to address the irrationality and suddenness of the tragedy. However, they may also address the issue sporadically over time. Be prepared to answer questions as different aspects of the situation occur to your child.

It is normal that some children may have little or no reaction, especially if they do not have a close relationship with the individuals involved in the tragedy. Be sensitive to what children hear on the news.

The Issue of Trust
Due to the nature of this tragedy, children’s trust in adults may be shaken. This is a normal response. They should be encouraged to talk about their concerns. Reassure children that any problems will be taken care of in a way that keeps everyone safe.

How to Answer Your Child’s Questions:
1. Talk in an age-appropriate way using words and concepts your children will understand. Younger children often need less details than older children.
2. Ask your children if they have questions. Only give them the information they request. Let them talk about their understanding and theories of the event as a way to manage their feelings and regain a sense of control over their environment. Allow children to play out some of these events with toys, drawings or stories.
3. Answer questions as honestly as possible. It is also okay to say you do not have answers to all questions about the situation.
4. It may be easier for children to talk about how other children are thinking and feeling about the incident as a way to discuss their own feelings.
5. Let your children discuss and deal with the tragedy at their own pace. Some children prefer a brief discussion, and then return to it later, as they are able to understand more.
6. In times of tragedy, love and care in the family is a primary need. Extra time should be spent with children, and physical closeness is needed.

Children react to tragedy differently than adults. They also exhibit different reactions at different stages in the developmental process. The following are some possible children’s reactions to tragedy.

2 to 6 Years (Pre-School)
- May engage in play about the tragic event -- sometimes to the distress of parents or adults
- Anxious attachment toward caretakers maybe include physically holding on to adults; not wanting to sleep alone.

6 to 10 Years
- Play is the primary method of expression; often including art, drawing, dance or music.
- A child may be less able to concentrate at school
- A normally quiet child may become active and noisy; the normally active child becoming lethargic
- May withdraw trust from adults
- May experience headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, physical complaints
- May have increasing difficulty in controlling their own behaviors
- May regress to previous developmental stages

Pre-Adolescence:
- May become more childlike in attitude
- May be very angry at unfairness of the tragedy
- May suppress thoughts and feeling to avoid thinking about the tragedy
- May develop physical symptoms.
For Parents and Adults

Children look to their parents for guidance in dealing with difficult situations.

Children are sensitive to their parent’s mood and reaction. Your emotional reactions are normal and it will help your child if you can explain your feelings in a very simple way. The following are some suggestions that will help you with this process.

SHOCK AND CONFUSION
Your initial reaction to tragedy might be one of shock and disbelief. Wondering, “How could this happen?” This numbing stage begins when people first hear of the tragedy.

TALK...and LISTEN
Talking about your feelings about the tragedy and recounting memories of those involved is an important step in the acceptance and healing process. Seek out friends and family—utilize your social supports. When you talk about the event with others, accept whatever feelings are expressed. A variety of feelings may come up. It’s important to be aware of your own reactions and not judge yourself or others.

TEARS CAN HELP
Crying can help you recover because it helps to release your stress and inner turmoil. Deep breaths can also release tension.

ACCEPTANCE
An important fact to remember is that everyone deals with tragedy and loss a little bit differently. We should accept that others will not have the same reactions that we have. It is sometimes difficult for us to understand others’ ways of coping, and we may wind up unintentionally criticizing them or judging them for not handling it well. Rather, we should try to understand what their coping mechanisms are, and what their strengths are.

FAITH
One place to turn in times of tragedy is toward your faith community. Faith can be a great source of strength during times of loss because it gives people meaning in their lives. The traumatic situation is often so overwhelming that people lose sight of their spiritual needs.

If you experience persisting problems, you might seek professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist, pastoral counselor, or social worker. Knowing when to ask for help may avoid more serious problems later.

Recommended Reading:
- Love Never Stops: A Memory Book for Children by Emilio Pargo
- Tear Soup by Pat Schweibert
- The Ten Good Things About Barney by Judith Viorst
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny
- You Hold Me and I’ll Hold You by Jo Carson
- When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Harold S. Kushner

Samaritan Interfaith Counseling Staff

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If you feel you need help dealing with this or any other concern, please call Samaritan Interfaith at:

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