



BETTER
KID CARE

May 2009



Family Time Work Time

A BALANCING ACT

Building Strong Families

How to Help Your Child When Bad Things Happen



Happy times and sad times are a part of life. Parents naturally want to protect their children from bad things that happen, but that is not always possible. Children do need to learn how to deal with times when sad or bad things occur. Some examples of things that can happen are the death of a beloved relative or a pet. It might be moving to a different home or a friend moving away. Parents separating or going through a divorce is very difficult for a child. There may be a natural disaster such as a blizzard, flood, or tornado. A child might witness a crime or some kind of violence. Many families have a parent or other relative in the military, possibly in a war area. This will cause a child to have fears for her safety.

What can you do to help your child through sad or frustrating times?

Here are some suggestions:

- Help your child talk about her feelings. Say, "You're feeling sad right now because your friend Mindy moved away. You miss her and it makes you feel sad. Do you want to talk about it?"
- Talk about your feelings some times when you are feeling sad. This will show your child how you deal with your feelings.
- Feelings about a move to a new home can be both happy and sad. Let your child know that it's normal to feel both.
- Young children sometimes develop fears. They are not yet able to tell the difference between what is real and what is pretend. You need to let your child know you are there to help and comfort him.
- If a death occurs, do not be afraid to talk about it with your child. Children need to hear the truth.
- It's ok to cry if you are sad, too. Your child may cry with you. That's ok. Both of you are showing your feelings and they are honest ones.
- Reading stories about things that make a child sad can be helpful. Your local library should have books about death, divorce, moving, fears, and other topics.
- Children in families going through a divorce or separation need lots of support and attention from both parents. They need to be reassured that they are not to blame. They may feel angry and scared, as well as sad. Those feelings are all normal.
- If you have someone away in the military, talk about how you will miss that person, too. Say, "Daddy is away because he has a job to do and he will miss you, too." Encourage your child to draw pictures or write letters to keep in touch.
- If there is a natural disaster, reassure your child that you will do your best to take care of her.



Play Can Help Children with Angry or Sad Feelings

When your child is frustrated, angry, or sad about something, he can be helped by certain kinds of play. Here are ways play can help:



- Play dough activities are great for helping a child work through frustrations. Play dough can be pounded, rolled, and squished in many different ways.
 - Give your child some washable markers and some paper to draw on. She can draw furiously with the markers to help negative feelings go away.
 - Finger painting and other painting activities can help children calm down.
 - Put on some lively music for your child to dance to.
- Give your child a place to dig in the dirt.
 - Playing in water is soothing for a child. Fill a plastic tub and put it on a table covered with an old shower curtain or plastic table cloth. Give your child some small plastic containers for pouring water or some small boats to float. Stay close to your child around water.
**To prevent a drowning accident, an adult must always be within arm's length of a child near water.*
 - Have your child crumple old magazine pages or newspaper into balls and throw them into a box or laundry basket.
 - Use humor to help. Sing silly songs, say silly poems, or tell funny stories. Laughter is a good cure for sad or bad feelings.



A Few Minutes of Fun

Take some time at the end of a busy work day to go outside and play for a bit with your child. Some suggestions are playing games such as follow the leader, Simon says, tag, rolling a ball back and forth with a younger child, or catch with an older child. The important thing is to have some fun together. A few minutes of fun and active play can help work out frustrations and make everyone's mood more positive!

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Resources: : Morris A. Wessel, M.D., January 1981, *Coping with Death, Parents Magazine*; Jim Greenman, 2001, *What Happened to the World?*; Fred Rogers, 2002, *The Mister Rogers Parent Book*, Family Communications, Inc.; Lyn Horning, *Helping Children with Sad Times*, Better Kid Care Program, Penn State University; Nancy Wilson, April 2009, *How to Help Your Child When Bad Things Happen, Play Can Help Children with Angry or Sad Feelings, A Few Minutes of Fun*, Better Kid Care Program, Penn State University.

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