



## HELPING KIDS COPE WITH TRAGEDY

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By Wayne D. Stocks

December 18, 2012



In light of the events in Newtown, CT on December 14, 2012, we here at Divorce Ministry 4 Kids wanted to take a break from our “normal” ministry to children of divorce and look at the wider issue of helping kids deal with tragedy. The two are not wholly unrelated as divorce is a tragedy for the kids involved, but the purpose of this article is much larger. The purpose of this article is to help parents, children’s ministry workers, teachers and anyone else who works with kids to process tragedy. This past Saturday, I published an article on helping kids deal with

tragedy (<http://divorceministry4kids.com/2012/helping-kids-deal-with-tragedy/>). It includes links to a variety of resources on this topic.

Sunday night, I was asked to participate in a special episode of the Kids Ministry Collective Radio Show to discuss the topic of helping kids deal with tragedy. You can find an archive of that show featuring special guest Linda Ranson Jacobs at <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/cmconnect/2012/12/16/kmc-special-edition--when-tragedy-strikes->. In preparing for that show, I read numerous articles from experts on how to help kids and compiled what is a fairly comprehensive list of notes that I thought might benefit our readers. This article includes those notes on how to help kids, helpful scriptures for helping kids deal with tragedy, age-appropriate information, and ideas on how to plan and prepare kids for future tragedies and an extensive listing of additional resources available online.

### Initial Thoughts

When it comes to tragedy, it is important to remember that life presents us with a series of teachable moments for our kids. Some of those are not very stressful, and some are tragic. As parents, and those who work with kids, we need to make sure that we don’t let these teachable moments slip away in the process of dealing with a tragedy. Deuteronomy 6 is the picture that God gives us a capitalizing on the teachable moments in our lives to impart spiritual truth in our children. In tragic events, there are things that we can learn and things that we can model for our kids.

### Helping Children

In preparing my notes, I must have read 20-30 articles from different experts with lists of how to help kids. Those lists all boiled down to 12 general things you should do to help kids in the face of tragedy. I have added a couple of my own to come up with a list of 14 things. It is my prayer that these will help you to help the kids in your influence deal with the tragedies of the past week as well as any future tragedies which may happen in our fallen world.





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### I. STAY CALM

- a. Children take their cues in terms of how to react to a tragedy primarily from their parents and also from the other adults in their lives.
- b. In the end, our kids will cope with tragic events as well as we do.
- c. Accordingly, we must avoid being overly protective of our kids.
- d. Be honest about your own emotions with your kids, but we must also model strength in the face of sadness, grief and other emotions.
- e. As a follower of Christ, this presents an opportunity to model reliance on God in dealing with strong and overwhelming emotion.

### II. TURN OFF THE TV

- a. Our initial reaction tends to be a desire for more information. This is not always best for our kids. Turn off the TV when the kids are around.
- b. When children see the same events played over and over on the news, they don't realize it's repeated and may assume the same tragic event is happening over and over again.
- c. This is very confusing – particularly to young children.
- d. Young children also have trouble distinguishing between what happens close to home and what happens far away. Young children will assume that tragic events on the TV are happening close to home. Reassure them that these events unfolded far away (if that is the case).
- e. Consider allowing your kids to get their news from outlets specifically geared towards kids.
- f. If your kids are watching the events on the news, and you must leave the TV on, watch with them and be prepared to answer any questions and help them process the information.
- g. Remember that, in addition to TV, children today also get their news online, on their iPods and Kindles and from social network sites.

### III. TALK & LISTEN

- a. This is the first and most important step in helping your kids.
- b. Make sure you start the conversation. This shows them that you are interested in what they think.
- c. Don't leave children to their own interpretations of events. If you don't talk to them and fill in any holes in information, they will create their own version of what happens which may be worse than the reality of it.
- d. Ask what they know about what is going on.
- e. Allow children to play or draw as an outlet for expressing their emotions.
- f. Don't interrupt when listening to your kids.
- g. Children will need time to process any conversations you have. Come back to them a couple of hours after any significant conversation and check in with your kids.





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- h. Express your own emotions without putting theirs down. In other words, don't tell them how they feel or lead them to believe that they should react the same way you do.
- i. Expect repetitious and redundant conversations.
- j. Encourage verbalization.

### IV. TELL THE TRUTH

- a. Kids are smart.
- b. They will figure it out if you are lying to them or misleading them.
- c. If they figure out that you are lying or sugar-coating, they will think you're afraid to tell them the truth.

### V. STICK TO THE FACTS

- a. It will be impossible for you to keep events or details secret.
- b. Share facts with your kids as they process the events.
- c. Don't dwell on scale or scope of the tragedy.
- d. Don't overwhelm children with information they might not want or understand.

### VI. WATCH YOUR KIDS / KNOW YOUR KIDS

- a. All children are unique and their response will also be unique. You need to know the child you are dealing with in order to respond effectively.
- b. Children might not verbalize what they are thinking or feeling.
- c. It is important that you know your kids and watch for signs of stress, fear, and anxiety.
- d. Watch for changes in behavior, appetite and sleep patterns.
- e. Pay particular attention to kids who might be at risk due to prior traumatic events.

### VII. VALIDATE EMOTIONS

- a. The Bible tells us to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.
- b. All children will process tragic events differently. Some children will:
  - i. Cry
  - ii. Threaten
  - iii. Act out
  - iv. Be Aggressive
  - v. Be Quiet
  - vi. Withdraw
- c. Oftentimes, tragedy will bring out emotions children have never experienced before and emotion that will be experienced in a much deeper way than ever before.
- d. Remind children that it is OK to be upset.





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- e. Help children to verbalize and name their emotions. Most children only have a very basic understanding of their emotions and will be unable to express what they are feeling without help. Accordingly, asking “how do you feel about that?” is not likely to elicit helpful information.
- f. Teach children how to express their emotions in appropriate ways
- g. Talk to children about their feelings.
- h. Dealing with emotions, and learning how to name and express those emotions, will help the child to grow in the long-term.

### VIII. REASSURE THEIR SAFETY

- a. A child’s primary concern will be with their own security.
- b. Children want to know who will take care of them.
- c. Reassure them, as you are able that they are safe.
- d. Point out specific factors which ensure their safety.
- e. Make it short and to the point
  - i. Too many words will backfire on you.
  - ii. Be brief and businesslike.
- f. Be hopeful in your reassurance.
- g. Don’t provide false reassurance or over-promise in your effort to make the child feel better.
- h. Remind the child that God is with them no matter where they are, and that He is control.

### IX. MAINTAIN DAILY ROUTINES

- a. In the face of a tragedy, children will feel a loss of control and security.
- b. By maintaining daily rituals and routines, and not cancelling pre-existing plan, you can provide kids with a sense of “normalcy” in the face of crisis.
- c. This doesn’t mean that you bury your head in the sand and don’t talk about the tragic events.
- d. It just means that they do not supplant and totally negate your normal routines.

### X. POINT OUT THE GOOD

- a. Refocus the child’s attention on the good in the current situation.
- b. Point to firefighters, medics, police men and other who protect us and provide valuable services.
- c. Research efforts to assist those touched by the tragedy.

### XI. DO SOMETHING TOGETHER

- a. Find an opportunity to serve together.
- b. Find a way to help those touched directly by the tragedy.
- c. Find proactive ways to get involved.
- d. Have fun together, and reassure your children that it’s still OK to have fun.





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- e. Take a walk together or engage in some other physical activity.
- f. Spend extra time together before bed reading together or cuddling.

### XII. MONITOR YOURSELF

- a. To help your kids deal with tragedy, you have to make sure that you are dealing with it yourself.
- b. Watch your stress levels.
- c. Turn off the TV for yourself.
- d. Model right-thinking with your kids
- e. Let them know that you are sad, but it will get better.
- f. Let them know that you place your trust in God.

### XIII. PRAY

- a. Pray with your children.
- b. You may need to help children find the words to pray, but also remind them that God knows what it is their hearts.
- c. Encourage them to pray for the victims of the tragedy and their families.
- d. Pray for any first-responders and communities that are affected.

### XIV. BE WILLING TO ADMIT WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW

- a. We don't have to have all the answers.
- b. Don't be reluctant to let kids know that you don't know.
- c. If the issue is a matter of factual information, let the child know that you will try to find the answer.
- d. If the issue is more of a "why" type question, help the child to think through possible answers without feeling like you have to land on one answer as the "right" response.

### Helpful Scripture

One thing we can do when kids face tragedy is point them to the truth of God's Word. The following scriptures might be helpful.

#### ❖ **Isaiah 41:10**

*"...fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10 ESV)*





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❖ **Revelation 21:4**

*“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4 ESV)*

❖ **1 Peter 5:6-7**

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7 ESV)*

❖ **1 John 4:4**

*Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 ESV)*

❖ **2 Timothy 1:7**

*For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. (2 Timothy 1:7 ESV)*

❖ **Romans 5:3-5**

*Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5 ESV)*

❖ **Psalms 34:18**

*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18 ESV)*

❖ **John 16:33**

*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 ESV)*

❖ **Matthew 5:1**

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4 ESV)*





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### ❖ Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever. (Psalm 23 ESV)*

### ❖ Hebrews 13:8

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8 ESV)*

### ❖ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance; (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 ESV)*

### Age-Appropriate Information

It is important in dealing with children to understand that children will react differently to tragedy depending on their age and stage of development. The following are some general guidelines based on age.





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### A. PRESCHOOL

1. At this age, children might be frightened and think that the same thing will happen to them.
2. At this age, children can't tell the difference between TV shows and news.
3. They are vulnerable to fears that feed nightmares, separation anxiety, etc.
4. Don't express your anxiety in front of them.
5. Reassure them – physically if needed.
6. Let them know they're safe.
7. Let them know, if it's true, that it is unlikely to happen again.
8. Encourage them to draw pictures about the disaster.

### B. EARLY ELEMENTARY

1. Be brief and simple in your explanations.
2. Provide the reassurance of daily structure.
3. At this age, children may ask questions just to know the answers – not because they are particularly concerned.
4. Children at this age will likely lose interest when they realize that a tragedy doesn't affect their daily lives.

### C. UPPER ELEMENTARY / MIDDLE SCHOOL

1. Children at this age will ask questions.
2. They are beginning to develop abstract thinking and are able to separate reality from fantasy.
3. At age 6-9, children develop the ability to understand concepts like death.
4. At age 10-11, they begin to understand tragedy in personal ways.
5. Be honest with them.
6. Remind them that God is in control.

### D. UPPER MIDDLE SCHOOL / HIGH SCHOOL

1. Older children will have strong and varying opinions about the cause of any tragedy.
2. At this age, you should listen more and lecture less.





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### Planning for the Future

As those who work with children, we need to be prepared for the next tragedy. What can we do to make sure that we, and our children, are prepared? What preventative measures can we take? There is much that your church and your children's ministry can do, but in this article we will address two very specific things.

#### **A. PLANNING**

1. Have a written plan that you review regularly with volunteers.
2. Provide volunteers and parents with that information.
3. Have drills to practice your plan with kids and adults.
4. Consider weaknesses in your plan and your facilities.
5. Consult with experts in your congregation (fire fighters, police men, medics, etc.)

#### **B. SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION**

1. We need to prepare children for future tragedies by giving them a solid foundation in the truth of God.
2. We need to teach what it means to trust God in a very practical way.
3. We need to model for our kids that a Christian life spent following Christ is not always happy and picture perfect. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation."
4. We need to let children know that it is ok to have questions and doubts and teach them how to process through those to a deeper and more personal faith.
5. We need to teach kids about the "Godness of God" – meaning that we need to teach kids about all the attributes of God and not focus on one (like love) to the exclusion of others.

### Resources

Fortunately, many people are publishing resources in reaction to this tragedy. These are valuable resources which we should print and file away for future reference. My research for this article came principally from the following sources:

- [School Shooting in Newton School: Advice for Parents by Linda Ranson Jacobs](#)
  - (<http://lindaransonjacobs.wordpress.com/2012/12/14/school-shooting-in-newton-school-advice-for-parents/>)
- [Responding to the Tragedy in Connecticut from KidzMatter](#)
  - (<http://www.justfranktalk.com/responding-to-the-tragedy-in-connecticut/1253/>)





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- [Kidology Discussion Forum](#)
  - ([http://www.kidology.org/network/forum/forum\\_posts.asp?TID=10299](http://www.kidology.org/network/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=10299))
- [Helping Children Deal With Tragedy by Dr. Scott Turansky](#)
  - (<http://www.churchleaders.com/children/childrens-ministry-how-tos/132863-helping-children-deal-with-tragedy.html>)
- [Do You Wonder Why? Crisis Booklet](#)
  - ([http://www.cefonline.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=961%3Aadyww&catid=119%3Afor-churches&Itemid=100037](http://www.cefonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=961%3Aadyww&catid=119%3Afor-churches&Itemid=100037))
- [Tragic Events in the News by the Fred Rogers Company](#)
  - (<http://fci.org/new-site/par-tragic-events.html>)
- [Helping your children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting from the American Psychological Association](#)
  - (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/aftermath.aspx>)
- [How To Talk To Kids About Tragedy by Mark Harper](#)
  - (<http://50.116.101.109/~famchurc/markharper.me/?p=87>)
- [5 Tips on Talking to Kids About Scary News by Sasha Emmons](#)
  - (<http://www.parenting.com/article/5-tips-on-talking-to-kids-about-scary-news>)
- [Talking to Kids About Scary News Stories by Dr. Paul Coleman](#)
  - (<http://www.parentsconnect.com/parenting-your-kids/parenting/talking-to-kids-about-scary-news.html>)
- [Helping Children Cope With Violence from Ministry Matters](#)
  - (<http://www.ministrymatters.com/worship/article/entry/3467/helping-children-cope-with-violence>)
- [Help Kids Cope With Tragedy by Dr. Charles Fay](#)
  - (<http://www.familiesforgod.com/help-kids-cope-with-tragedy%E2%80%A8/>)
- [Three Rules for Teaching Kids About Tragedy from Focus on the Family](#)
  - (<http://www.focusonthefamily.com/broadcast/todays-spotlight/articles/three%20rules%20for%20teaching%20kids%20about%20tragedy.aspx>)
- [Helping Children Cope With Tragedy from Redeemer Presbyterian Church](#)
  - ([http://www.redeemer.com/care/coping/helping\\_children.html](http://www.redeemer.com/care/coping/helping_children.html))
- [Here for Each Other by Sesame Street](#)
  - ([http://www.sesameworkshop.org/assets/1192/src/HereForEachOther\\_vEng2012Modified.pdf](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/assets/1192/src/HereForEachOther_vEng2012Modified.pdf))
- [How to Talk To Your Child About the News from KidsHealth](#)
  - (<http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/news.html>)
- [Helping Kids Cope With Tragedy from DisneyFamily.com](#)
  - (<http://family.go.com/parenting/article-sk-195132-helping-kids-cope-with-tragedy-t/>)





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- [Helping Children Cope With Tragedy Related Anxiety from Mental Health America](#)
  - (<http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/coping-with-disaster/helping-children-handle-disaster-related-anxiety>)
- [A National Tragedy: Helping Children Cope from the National Association of School Psychologists](#)
  - ([http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/terror\\_general.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/terror_general.aspx))
- [School Shootings: How to Empower Kids in the Face of Armed School Violence](#)
  - (<http://www.kidpower.org/library/article/weapons-schools/>)
- [Kids in Crisis](#)
  - (<http://www.kidsincrisis.org/>)
- [Helping Children Cope After a School Shooting](#)
  - (<http://www.myschoolpages.com/schools/darienps/files/filesystem/School%20Message.pdf>)
- [How to Talk To Your Kids When Tragedy Strikes by Ron Brooks](#)
  - (<http://www.pastorronbrooks.com/?p=613#sthash.eAGv8tDs.TSw5jswm.dpbs>)
- [Talking to Children About the Sandy Hook Tragedy by Dale Hudson](#)
  - (<http://www.relevantchildrensministry.com/2012/12/talking-to-children-about-sandy-hook.html>)
- [Church Security Training & Tips by Anthony D. Coppedge](#)
  - (<http://anthonycoppedge.com/problog/2012/12/church-security-training-tips/>)
- [Age Level Insights – News from Group Publishing](#)
  - (<http://anthonycoppedge.com/problog/2012/12/church-security-training-tips/>)
- [Helping Children Deal With Tragedy from the National Center for Biblical Parenting](#)
  - (<http://anthonycoppedge.com/problog/2012/12/church-security-training-tips/>)
- [Helping Your Kids Respond Biblically to the Connecticut School Shooting by Steven Knight](#)
  - (<http://kidmintools.com/2012/12/16/helping-your-kids-respond-biblically-to-the-connecticut-school-shooting/>)
- [Responding to the Tragedy in Connecticut by Bob Russell](#)
  - (<http://www.bobrussell.org/2012/12/14/responding-to-the-tragedy-in-connecticut/>)
- [How Do I Send My Kids to School on Monday? By Sam Luce](#)
  - (<http://samluce.com/2012/12/how-do-i-send-my-kids-to-school-on-monday/>)
- [Dealing With Children During Crisis by Bill Emeott](#)
  - ([http://blog.lifeway.com/kidsministry101/2012/12/15/dealing-with-children-during-crisis/#.UM\\_qKeRZV1N](http://blog.lifeway.com/kidsministry101/2012/12/15/dealing-with-children-during-crisis/#.UM_qKeRZV1N))
- [How Can I Help My Child Cope With Disaster and Trauma from Focus on the Family](#)
  - ([http://family.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a\\_id/26257/](http://family.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/26257/))
- [Helping Kids Cope With Newtown Tragedy by Brian Dollar](#)
  - (<http://briandollar.com/2012/12/17/helping-kids-cope-with-the-newtown-tragedy/>)

