Support for Children after Shocking Events

A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, Educators, and Professionals

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Introduction

Shocking events come in many forms and can unsettle children and the adults around them. Whether the source is a natural disaster, interpersonal harm, systemic injustice, or a societal crisis, children attune to the emotional weather of their caregivers and feel it all. The impact follows a remarkably similar pattern. Children are wired for connection and safety. When those foundations are disrupted, even indirectly through images on a screen, tension in a parent's voice, or a shift in the emotional atmosphere of a classroom, their emotional world can be shaken. They may not have words for what they feel, but their behavior, their sleep, their play, and their closeness to you will tell the story.

This guide draws on more than three decades of Hand in Hand Parenting's work with families, educators, and professionals around the world. It brings together practical, evidence-informed strategies for supporting children through difficult times, and just as importantly, for supporting yourself. Because development unfolds in the context of relationships with important caregivers, and when you are resourced, your children have what they need most: you, present and warm, even in the storm.

Start with Yourself

The single most important thing you can do for your child after a shocking event is to attend to your own emotional state. This is an act of care for them and for you. It is the foundation of everything that follows.

Adults carry feelings about current events, and it is easy to fall into helplessness. Often, our first task is to remember what and whom we care most about. As children ourselves, we had an expectation that the world would be sweet, safe, and just. When tragedy breaks that expectation, we are led to the appropriate human response of grief, tears, and sometimes trembling. These responses are part of a healing process.

But here is what matters: this processing happens best with other adults. It is helpful for your children to see that you care about people and feel one with them in hard times. If your feelings bubble up in their presence, it is fine to show emotion openly, keeping the explanation brief and age-appropriate. "I'm sad about something I heard on the news, and I just need to cry for a little while to let the sadness out" is enough. You can then bring the details and the full depth of your emotions to other adults in your life, where you can support each other.

The Power of Listening Partnerships

Hand in Hand Parenting's most foundational tool for well-being is the Listening Partnership—a simple, structured exchange of listening time between two adults. You take turns: one person talks, feels, and thinks out loud while the other listens with warm, nonjudgmental attention. Then you switch. The listener simply offers presence. Tears are welcome, and so are laughter and silliness, and all emotions. You can find more about how to begin a Listening Partnership here.

This practice works because people who have been listened to return to their families and classrooms lighter, with clearer minds and more patience. Even one or two listening exchanges can produce meaningful shifts. Listening Partnerships are especially powerful after shocking events because they offer you a place to bring your fears and allow you to trace the sources of your feelings—many rooted in your own childhood—and separate old pain from the present reality. A war may reactivate feelings of helplessness from your early life. School violence may tap fears you carried long before becoming a parent or an educator. Giving these feelings an outlet means you will have more capacity to hold that same kind of space for the children in your care.

Finding a Listening Partner can be as simple as asking a trusted friend or colleague, joining the Hand in Hand Community, or connecting through a Hand in Hand class. The initial awkwardness fades quickly. What remains is a practice that thousands of parents and educators worldwide rely on to stay grounded.

Understanding How Children Experience Shock and Trauma

A traumatic or shocking experience, even one that ultimately turns out well, can create a knot of fear in a child's emotional memory. That knot is a bundle of sights, sounds, and perceptions from the moments they sensed danger, bound together by a powerful charge of fear. This is true whether the child directly experienced harm, witnessed something in person or on television, overheard an alarming conversation, or simply absorbed the tension of the adults around them. Their mind is better able to sort the experience, learn from it, and get back to daily life when they are able to share the emotional charge with a caring, attuned adult.

This is why a child may talk about a frightening event again and again, become clingy, have trouble sleeping, or suddenly develop fears that seem unrelated. Their mind is trying to process, but every time it reaches for one piece of the memory, the entire emotional load comes flooding back. They may also express distress indirectly through tantrums over small things, whining, teasing, or getting upset about seemingly unrelated things. These "small upsets" that we may initially view as overreactions serve as can openers for the larger emotions inside. It is a lot easier to be upset about a broken cookie than to make sense of

complex feelings about things they may not fully understand. And they don't have to. Being listened to about the broken cookie is still working on those core feelings underneath.

It is essential to understand that this behavior is the child's best attempt to heal. Children have an innate emotional processing system just like adults: they talk, cry, tantrum, tremble, and laugh their way back to equilibrium. Our job is to stay close while they share those emotions and work through the associated tensions.

Protecting Children While Supporting Their Healing

The tension every caregiver faces is between protecting children from information they cannot process and supporting them in working through the feelings they inevitably absorb. Both matter. Here is how to hold that balance.

Limit Exposure

Whenever possible, shield children from the raw imagery that often comes with shocking events and tragedies. Children especially need to be buffered from graphic images, news footage, and detailed adult conversations about a disaster or violent events. Be intentional about what your children see and hear, and save detailed conversations for times with just other adults.

Listen to What Surfaces

When your child brings up fears, directly or through off-track behavior, your task is to listen. Stay close. Offer warmth and reassurance in a relaxed tone. "You are safe. I am right here." Said with calm confidence, these words give a child the anchor they need to feel their feelings fully. Expect the tears, the struggling, the loud protests. Sometimes, the warmer and more loving you are, the more intensely the feelings may come, and that is a direct acknowledgment of the sense of safety you have provided.

This is the Hand in Hand tool called Staylistening: remaining present, with warmth and without judgment, while a child moves through a big emotional experience. Your only task is to be there. Your presence, your touch, your eyes, your steady voice, is just what they need.

Use Simple Words

When children ask questions, answer simply and honestly, matching your response to their developmental understanding. You can say that lots of adults feel upset because something happened that hurt many people. You can explain that you have feelings too, and that you will be talking to other grown-ups to work through your upsets. You can say, "I don't know" when you don't. A few honest words are enough. What children need most is to know that their adults are thinking about it and are present with them.

Practical Strategies for Connection and Adaptability

In the days and weeks following a shocking event, or during an extended period of societal stress, children need extra doses of connection, safety, and play. The following strategies, drawn from Hand in Hand's five core listening Tools, can be woven into everyday life using only what you already have.

Create a Family Safety Plan

Children need to be told explicitly that they are safe, and they need to hear it more than once. Sit down together and create a simple plan: who takes care of them, where they go if something happens, and name the people in their circle of safety. Revisit the plan periodically so it stays alive in their awareness. For children who have been frightened by a specific event, name the safeguards that are now in place. Concrete reassurance is more powerful than abstract comfort.

Offer Special Time

Special Time is a defined period—even five or ten minutes—during which you give your child your full, warm attention and let them lead the activity. Children need connection and attention like they need air and food. Your attention during Special Time signals that they matter, that you are available, and that joy is still possible. During stressful periods, children may need more frequent doses of Special Time, even brief ones.

If you are so depleted and this seems too daunting, be gentle with yourself. Sitting near your child, making eye contact, or reading or telling a story in a silly voice counts. Connection thrives on presence, even in small doses.

Use Play to Dissolve Tension

Laughter is one of the body's most efficient ways to relieve stress, and play is how children access it. When you use what Hand in Hand calls Playlistening - taking the less powerful, role in play, inviting/offering playfulness or silliness, and following your child's laughter - you give your child the chance to work through tension, reclaim a sense of power, and rebuild connection with you.

Even low-energy play goes a long way. Balloon volleyball from an armchair, silly voice challenges, building together on the floor, or a pretend game where you comically fail at simple tasks can all generate the laughter that children need. If your child seems agitated rather than delighted by a game, it might be a sign that listening to their emotions may be more helpful. Shift to Staylistening and let the feelings come.

Set Warm, Simple Limits

During stressful times, children's behavior often goes off track. They may hit, refuse, cling, or test boundaries in ways that feel relentless. Underneath, a child may be searching for the safety of a limit so that the feelings can surface.

When a child is caught in a wave of feelings, words are often unable to reach them. What reaches them most effectively is your presence and attention, offered through touch, warmth, and connection, often with few words. If you need to set a limit on a behavior, use your body to stop the action gently. Offer eye contact. Use just a few simple words: "I can't let you grab that other child's toy." Then stay close. The limit is a helpful indication of your steady presence so your child can access and work through the feelings that were driving the behavior.

Manage Your Own Anger with Compassion

Parenting through a crisis can bring up every feeling you have—including ones you did not know existed. When anger rises, remember: the intensity almost certainly has roots in your own early experiences of fear or helplessness. Your child has simply unearthed something that was already there and is giving you the opportunity to address it.

Practical strategies help in the moment: create an "upset spot" where you can stomp or pound a pillow safely. Make an "I love you" sign with your children that they can show you when your tone frightens them. Choose a magic word together, something absurd, that pauses a heated moment. These tools respect both your capacity and your child's need for support. Make self- and community-care a priority. A regular Listening Partnership time can reduce the emotional charge of all of these moments for you so that old feelings are less easily activated when you are supporting your children.

A Note for Educators and Childcare Professionals

Childhood development unfolds in the context of relationships with important caregivers, and for many young children, some of their most important early connections are with their teachers or childcare providers. If you work in early childhood education, childcare, or school settings, you are on the front lines of children's emotional lives, especially in times of crisis. The building blocks of your relationships with children are sensitive, responsive interactions, and these matter most during moments of heightened emotion.

The same Hand in Hand Tools that support families at home can be adapted for the classroom. A pilot study of Hand in Hand's Foundations Course for Early Childhood Educators, published in the Infant Mental Health Journal, found that educators who learned the five listening Tools reported feeling calmer, warmer, and more compassionate with children. They described being calmer and more intentional in how they responded to children's emotions. Many noted that the approach - staying with children during emotional moments and trusting the healing power of connection - represented a fundamental shift in

how they understood their role. As one educator put it, children's emotional expression became something to accompany with warm connection (Sillars et al., 2025).

Special Time in the classroom can be as simple as five minutes of child-led play, scheduled once a week for each child. Staylistening allows an educator to stay present with a child having a hard moment while a co-teacher supports the rest of the group. Playlistening can transform transitions, mealtimes, and the moments when tension builds between children. Setting Limits, done with warmth and few words, helps children feel safe and held. And Listening Partnerships among colleagues can create what educators in the study described as a culture of connection - a sustainable practice of peer support that helps teaching teams stay grounded, reflective, and emotionally available to the children in their care.

Importantly, educators in the study also noticed a parallel process: when they were listened to, they could listen more fully to children. When they attended to their own feelings, the emotional climate of their classrooms shifted. This is as true in the aftermath of a shocking event as it is on any ordinary day. Hand in Hand offers a Foundations Course for Educators, presentation materials, and training resources specifically designed to support educators and the programs that serve young children and families.

A Note for Professionals

If you work with families as a therapist, social worker, pediatrician, home visitor, or community leader, these same principles apply. The Hand in Hand approach is trauma-informed, connection-based, and grounded in the understanding that parents and educators do best when they themselves have been heard. When families come to you after a shocking event, they often carry not just the immediate crisis but layers of accumulated stress. Helping them access emotional support through Listening Partnerships, peer groups, and your own warm presence, can be powerful. Hand in Hand offers a Foundations Course for Professionals, with training resources and support in integrating these Tools into their practice.

You Are Not Alone

Difficult times can feel completely overwhelming for you and your family. Whether you are processing the aftermath of a disaster, navigating your child's reaction to violence, or supporting a classroom through a community crisis, your presence with the children in your life is a powerful anchor.

Even the smallest moments listening to their fears, holding them close, and being together help them feel safe and loved. When they see you honoring your own feelings, they learn that it is okay to feel, to grieve, and to heal. You deserve support, too. Hand in Hand is here to hold space for you, to listen without judgment, and to walk alongside you as you do this most vital work, especially during challenging times.

About Hand in Hand Parenting

Hand in Hand Parenting is a global nonprofit organization offering trauma-informed, evidence-based support for parents and educators in over 38 countries, with materials in 15 languages. Our approach centers on five core listening Tools - Special Time, Playlistening, Staylistening, Setting Limits, and Listening Partnerships - that help adults build deep connections with children while tending to their own emotional well-being.

Learn more: www.handinhandparenting.org

Reference: Sillars, A., Vogelstein, A., Oatis, P. J., Schoch, A. D., Cole, A., Trivedi, P., & Coleman, M. (2025). Building a culture of connection in early childhood education: The Hand in Hand Foundations Course. Infant Mental Health Journal, 46(6), 675–695.

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