Although children have many of the same reactions as adults do to trauma, they have different ways of expressing their reactions and need some special help to cope. The following are some suggestions for dealing with the child in crisis.

- When disaster hits a family, the child often has to deal not only with the disaster, but with the parents being unavailable, who are, themselves, consumed with the disaster. One of the child’s biggest fears is the loss of his parents when he needs them. This fear often becomes fact in a disaster.
- Your child’s fears are real to him. He is truly afraid. He’s not trying to make life difficult for you. Treat all fears as genuine.
- Your child needs a lot of reassurance that you will take care of him.
- Keep all promises you make to your child during the crisis. In other words, do not make promises you cannot keep. It is important that he can count on you when all else is in chaos.
- Listen to your child. List to his fears. Listen to how he feels. Listen to his explanation about what he thinks happened.
- Explain the facts that you know about the disaster. You may have to explain more than once.
- Encourage him to talk.
- Include him in the clean up activities or other activities designed to return life to normal. He’ll feel more in control if he can help.
- Maintain your routine as much as possible.
- Young children need to be held.
- You may need to be flexible with bedtime routines. A child may need for you to stay with him while he falls asleep, he may want a night light, or to sleep with a sibling or with you. If you allow him to sleep with you, you should agree on a time (not more than 3 – 4 days) when he will return to his own bed.
- If your child is fearful of going to school, if counselors know when your child is in crisis, they can frequently help.
- Your child may draw pictures of the disaster or re-enact the disaster in his play. This can be very disturbing to adults. Children do not have the verbal skills that adults do, so this is their way of “talking” about the event. They should be encouraged to draw and re-enact the event. Help them verbalize what they are doing, how they feel about it, and what they think happened in the disaster.
- Sharing your feelings about the disaster with your child can be helpful. Telling your child that you were frightened too may help him feel better about his own responses. However, it is best not to share your fears about your (or his) ability to cope. Confidence that both of you will be able to cope is important.
- Do not expect your child to take care of your fears. For instance, do not keep your child home from school or have him sleep with you because you are afraid to be separated from him. Find help for yourself to cope with your own fears.
- Try to find a special time each day to spend together as a family. This is always a good idea, but especially important in times of crises.

Source: Nancy Rich, MA, LPC, Jefferson Center for Mental Health