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ON THE FAMILY.



# Parenting in the *Midst* of Tragedy

By Glenn Lutchens, M.A., LMFT

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## Introduction

Though, right now, your life is probably filled with uncertainties, one thing is true: **the experience you or your family faces is not the way you would have written life's script.** Something painful or even catastrophic has occurred in your world, and you are now left with the challenge of trying to pick up the pieces and move forward. The ravages of tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires, epidemics, terrorism, war, death, suicide, or injury can leave us overwhelmed and confused.

Nothing will eliminate the pain that you or your children have suffered, but **there are steps you can take to help your family face those circumstances with courage and confidence.**

When a child witnesses or experiences a tragedy, your guidance and input as a parent is crucial to the level of recovery that will occur. Humans were designed to be resilient in the face of difficult circumstances as long as they face the pain. Keep in mind that each child is different—one's personality, past experiences, and age can create unique reactions that require specific responses on your part. Observe your child and see what emotional, mental, and spiritual changes you detect since the trauma has occurred.





## What happens to our bodies in a tragic experience?

For both adults and children, in situations that we interpret as emergencies, our brains trigger our sympathetic nervous system (SNS), and more specifically our limbic system, into a fight, flight, or freeze reaction.

Blood runs away from our brain and runs instead to our hands and our feet to deal with the situation. **It's a God-given reaction that helps us deal constructively with something in the moment.**

The problem is that if we stay in that state for too long, it can do damage physically, emotionally, and even spiritually. **It's like driving a car in the wrong gear for an extended time: it will damage the engine!**

**Here are some suggestions that may give your child the best opportunity** to work through the pain of the present tragedy and move forward in a healthy manner.





## Try to keep your child in a routine as much as possible.

When trauma strikes, disorientation, doubt, and confusion will likely happen. **Balanced routine will create a sense of normalcy in a child's life.** Right now, much of your child's life may feel like it's upside down. But what activities can continue with minimal interruption? Can familiar food be prepared? Can a bedtime routine carry on uninterrupted? Can a child continue school life as before?

No doubt, circumstances will require change, but giving thought to **how you can maintain familiar patterns will be well worth the effort.** This will help your child from staying in that heightened sympathetic nervous system (SNS) reaction continually.



# 2



## Let children know you are there for them.

Give verbal, emotional, and physical support through **praise, hugs, and a listening ear**. Healthy touch and encouragement raise oxytocin levels in our bodies and brain, releasing hormones that heighten emotional bonding. **A sense of security** will often give your child the strength to face the trauma.

**It is possible to do this to excess.** If that happens, the child may wonder who really needs the support, himself or the parent. Or a parent may smother with too much attention, and actually create more fear and insecurities in the child.



# 3



## Have fun with your child.

As difficult as it may feel, do things that allow you to laugh together. Playing games, telling jokes, or sharing family stories can help lighten everyone's load. Working through the pain will take time, but **fun and laughter are a necessary part of the process.** A board game, a trip to the park, lunch at a local restaurant, or a good movie together can help put a smile on your child's face. Grieving can't take place in a nonstop fashion—we all need the emotional break that fun provides.



**When the cares of my  
heart are many, your  
consolations cheer  
my soul.**

PSALM 94:19

# 4



## **Tell your child that being honest with our emotions is not only okay, but valuable.**

We're each made in the image of our Creator, emotions and all. **Use understandable word pictures to present the importance of facing our feelings.** For example, to convey the truth of Matthew 5:4, NIV, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," you could talk about bandages. They keep dirt out, but they let air in. Just as wounds are healed by exposure to air, so too, hurts are healed when the pain is faced.

**A child may develop behavioral patterns that lock out the fears or hurts.** Social withdrawal, passivity, aggressiveness, rebellion, or busyness, substance abuse, etc., may be used to push the feelings away. Such patterns may win the battle but will ultimately lose the war. They may create a false sense of peace for the moment, but at the expense of ever truly gaining freedom from the enslaving emotions.



# 5



## **Accept your child's emotions as they are.**

Your child's emotions will vary. One may initially experience shock, disbelief, or denial. The range of emotions such as fear, hurt, anger, rage, doubt, depression, hopelessness, guilt, apathy, and sadness may come and go. When your child expresses emotions, accept them; don't try to produce a different emotion that makes you feel more comfortable. Generally, if your child is honestly facing his emotions, over time, resolution will happen.



**Come to me, all who  
labor and are heavy  
laden, and I will give  
you rest.**

MATTHEW 11:28

# 6



## **Don't avoid discussing the tragedy with your child, but don't obsess on it either.**

A parent may be tempted to simply distract the child and not ever talk about the tragedy. In reality, the effects of the trauma are still there, they just haven't had an outlet to help the healing process. Be sensitive to what your child needs or wants to talk about—be there to listen.

Parents may unknowingly overwhelm a child with a barrage of questions. The child may experience discomfort from such an approach, and withdraw. You may find that a child talks more openly when sharing an activity with you side by side, like taking a walk, than during a face-to-face discussion.

Trying to avoid the painful experience completely will only hinder healing and will likely just push them down life's road to create a larger problem later.



# 7



## **Let your child ask questions about life at a deeper level.**

“Is there anything beyond what we see? Why does God allow suffering in our world? What happens when we die?” These are important questions children may be struggling with. Give them the freedom to raise them. The questions children ask provide a window into the ways they are trying to make sense of the storm they find themselves in. You don’t need to know all the answers, but it will be valuable for you to grapple with some of these same issues if you have not already done so.

You might ask your children what questions they would want to ask God about the tragedy.

Without frightening them, point out to your children that hurt and pain do happen in our world.

Let them know that you will do everything within your power to provide for their safety. But they also need to understand that there are limits to the safety you can offer. It becomes that much more important to put our ultimate trust in the One who made us.



# 8



## **Help your child take a step back from the tragedy.**

In the middle of the emotional chaos, help your child gain some perspective on it. Sometimes it's important to step out of the whirlwind and observe our thoughts and emotions rather than living in them. You might talk about what it would be like to fly in an airplane and see the trauma from above. **What would you learn about the tragedy from that vantage point?**

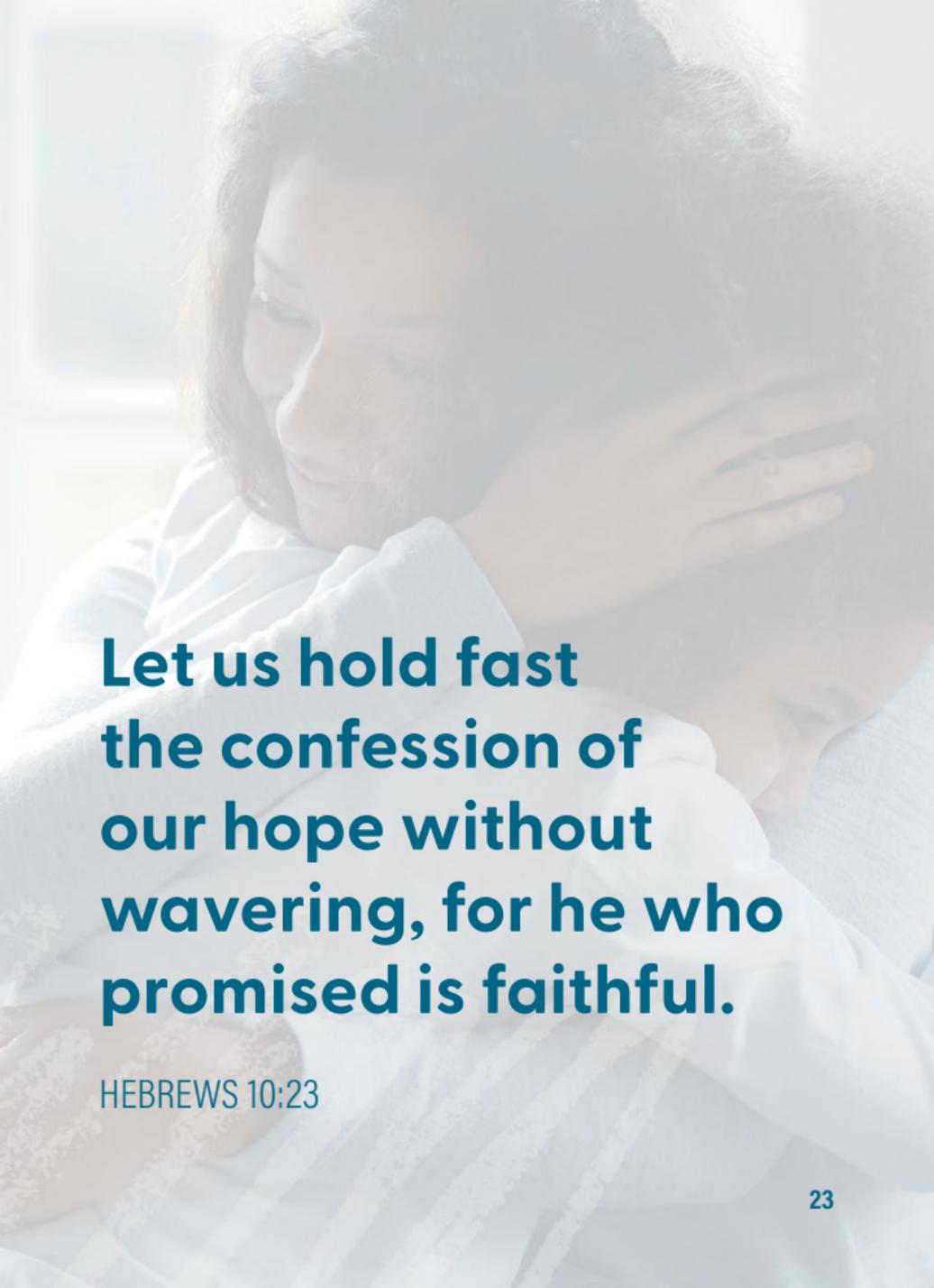
Again, this helps the child from being overloaded by their sympathetic nervous system (SNS) reaction continually. **All of us, even parents, need to step away from the tragedy for a time.**





## **Understand that your child may have lost trust in you.**

Particularly younger children will view parents as all-powerful. When tragedy strikes they may ask questions like: “Why didn’t my parents keep me safe? Can I trust them anymore?” The more a child’s needs have previously been met in a consistent manner, the easier it will be to regain trust. Give your child small opportunities to trust you before expecting larger expressions of it. Give it time. And avoid the temptation of taking your child’s distrust personally.

A soft-focus photograph of a woman with long dark hair hugging a young child from behind. The woman is looking down at the child with a gentle expression. The child is also looking down. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light. The overall mood is warm and affectionate.

**Let us hold fast  
the confession of  
our hope without  
wavering, for he who  
promised is faithful.**

HEBREWS 10:23



## **Be careful of media overload for your child.**

You may not want to keep your child from all media images, but unnecessary repetition of them can do further harm by creating insecurities and fears. You might read together instead of watching the news on TV. The younger the child, the more damaging the exposure to the images will be. But be careful. Older children may look like they can handle anything, but they can also be harmed by trauma overload.

A soft-focus photograph of a woman and a young child sitting together, looking down at an open book. The woman is on the left, and the child is on the right. The image has a light, ethereal quality with a white overlay. The text is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image.

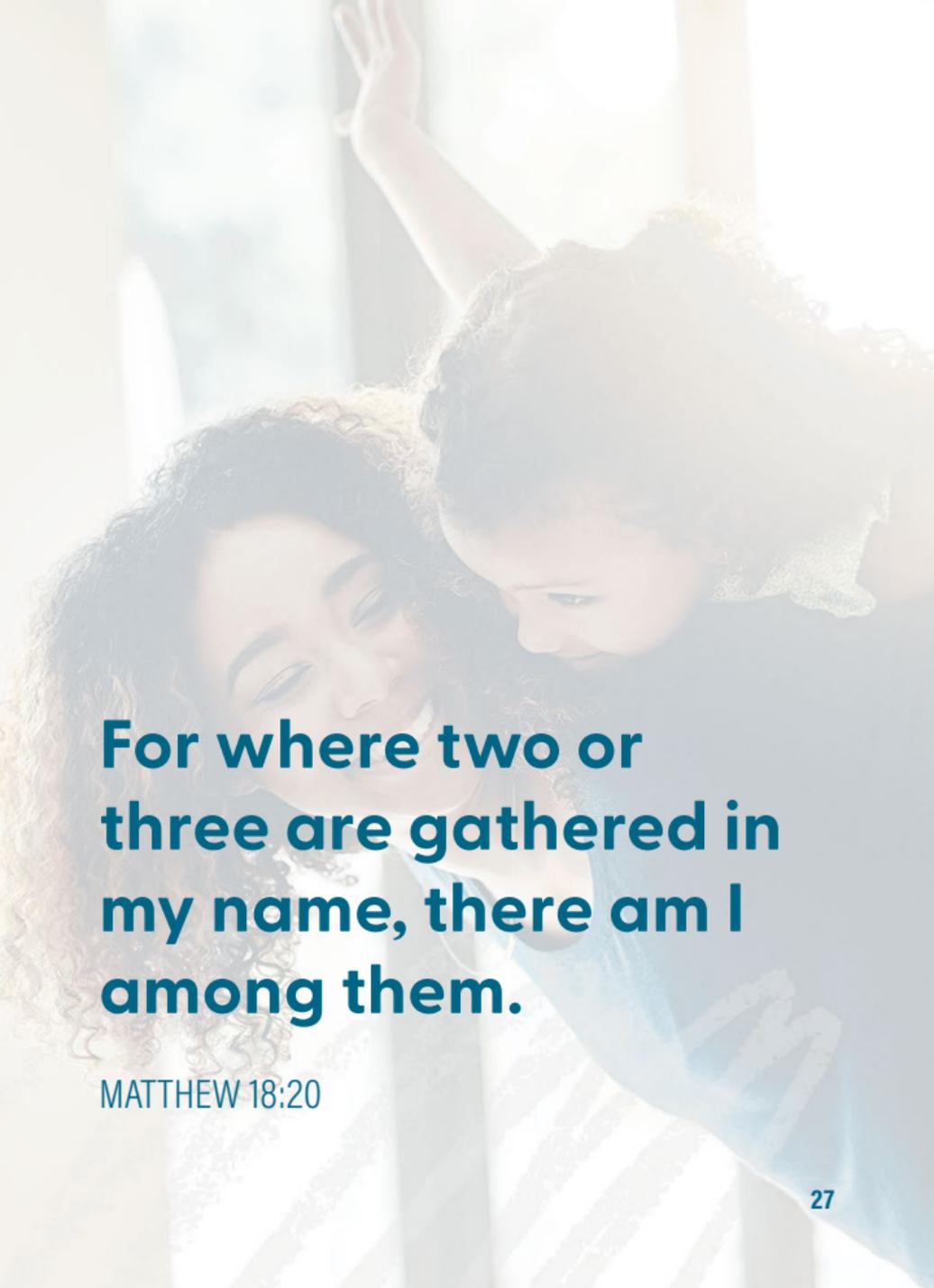
**Set your minds on  
things that are above,  
not on things that are  
on earth.**

COLOSSIANS 3:2



**If for some reason your child doesn't talk freely with you, let him talk to a safe, familiar person about the tragedy.**

Sharing feelings with someone will be a great help in processing the recent event, even if it's not with a parent. Sometimes the only alternative is holding it in, and that won't help. If possible, that person should be the same gender as your child and share your worldview. Long term, your goal as a parent can be to develop a more open relationship with your child. Sharing your feelings will work to develop a closer connection for the future.



**For where two or  
three are gathered in  
my name, there am I  
among them.**

MATTHEW 18:20



## Accept nonverbal forms of processing the tragic event.

Not all ways of addressing pain are done through discussion, especially in children. It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words. **Art, games, and drama can convey deep fears and hurts surrounding a tragedy that would not otherwise be expressed.** Journaling and poetry may express through a pen what would never be uttered through one's lips.

Be creative with your child and find ways to express and discuss these emotions. **For example, finger painting might give expression to one's sense of confusion about the trauma.** Play therapy with an experienced clinician can help a child resolve issues if stuck emotionally.





## Expect the ups and downs.

Dealing with tragedy has its ebbs and flows. One may be moving forward quite well and then, all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, will get hit with a wave of emotions. **Let your child know that such an experience is normal.** These waves of grief will come, but if dealt with, they will diminish over time.

**Give your child the chance to meet others who have also gone through the tragedy.**

If someone is not around others who've gone through a similar struggle, it can lead a person to believe, "I'm the only one." **It can help to be around others who can share their stories of healing and hope.** It's important, though, that someone helps guide the group so that there is a constructive tone to the discussion.





## Tell your children you love them.

For some of us, that's not easy to say. Yet, tragedy has a way of showing us **the brevity and fragile nature of life.**

If it's not easy to say, write it first in a note. **But work toward becoming more comfortable with those words even if you didn't hear them as a child.** Love has a way of showing us that there's more to life than what we see.

A photograph of a woman and a young girl hugging and smiling. The woman is on the right, and the girl is on the left. They are both looking at each other and smiling. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent light blue filter.

**Give thanks to the  
God of heaven, for  
his steadfast love  
endures forever.**

PSALM 136:26



## Face your own pain related to the tragedy.

If your child has faced pain, there is a very good chance you have as well. Initially, the circumstances may have required your immediate attention to survival or other details—finding food and water, gathering belongings, moving to safety, contacting family members about the tragedy, etc. You had no time to think about facing the emotions involved. It's tempting to stay in the task mode: "If I've avoided the feelings this long, maybe I can do so forever." **But that tactic will fail at some point.**

It may occur later at a stress point when it's important to deal with life in a rational, healthy manner. **As a result, you will probably be less available to your child at that moment than if you had deliberately worked through your own pain earlier.**

Hopefully, the way you address your emotions will model for your children a way they can constructively face theirs. Don't overwhelm them with your feelings—children need to see evidence in a parent that emotions can be managed. **On the other hand, they need to see pain addressed. Emotions are not the enemy.** You may need to talk with someone, write out what you're feeling, or even shed tears over the circumstances you've encountered. If you push it down, it will stay there, at least temporarily. **It usually doesn't remain suppressed but will come out in less healthy ways.** Remember what you've shared with your child, "It's not only okay to be honest with your emotions, it's valuable."





## Overwhelmed

Normal, simple tasks that once were commonplace in your child's routine may now be extremely difficult, if possible at all. The child's emotions of fear, anger, or sadness may be triggered without apparent reason. This is not uncommon shortly after a disaster. **But if your child remains overwhelmed over time, it may indicate that your child is stuck and needs further help.** Your child may experience distressing thoughts, nightmares, difficulty sleeping, or trauma-related flashbacks that will indicate the need for professional help.

**If possible, have a counselor evaluate him. Communicate to your child your availability through your presence.** Look at the stress level your child is shouldering. It might be too heavy. Are there some reasonable ways to reduce it? **You may need to temporarily shoulder some of his responsibilities yourself.** Be careful, though; you might unintentionally create a pattern of learned helplessness in your child if it persists. Helping your child take gradual steps to regain responsibility may minimize that problem.





## Disconnected

On the other hand, your child may be “underwhelmed,” seemingly withdrawn or unaffected by the whole experience. **This can be just as dangerous, since the emotions may be so frightening that the child pushes them away completely.** This may be difficult to detect since the child is living life in a seemingly normal fashion. People may unknowingly reinforce the disconnection by praising her strength or courage. But all is not well. The child may exhibit a detached quality, showing little or no emotion about the trauma, and completely avoiding discussion of the past events.

Help your child gradually face what is being avoided. Beyond our dislike of pain, see if there's a specific reason for the avoidance. This situation may be only one of many pains encountered in your child's life, and may have created an emotional backlog. It may simply feel safer to numb oneself than address the pain. **Show patience. During a side-by-side moment, you might ask a question like, "Talking about the flood isn't easy to do, is it?"** Again, how your child sees you deal with a tragic event can go a long way toward encouraging him to do so as well. While you may see the value of working on it, your child has to decide if she will deal with her own emotions. **If your child is open to it, meeting with a counselor may provide a safe outlet for the mix of emotions that need expression.**

It would be a lot easier if we could ignore life's tragic events. We may think, "Just push past it and everything will be fine." Unfortunately, that won't solve the problem.





## Create new dreams for the future.

"It's over; there's no hope." Tragedy will discourage a sense of excitement and optimism about the future more than anything else. Yet, even with as much pain as you and your child have experienced, you can face a new tomorrow. Without facing the hurts, such a thought is merely flowery sentiments. **But if grief has occurred, you and your child can look forward with hope.** When a forest burns down there's potential for new grass and plants to take root.

**Talk with your child about new possibilities and dreams.** Discuss and write down goals that can be pursued. Proverbs 29:18 says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (KJV).

**Helping your child deal with emotions with the intent of moving forward is a mark of your love.** Keep in mind, the more severe their initial tragedy or trauma, the more important it would be for children to receive therapy regardless of how they may seem to be handling it. **May you find God’s grace to help you with the opportunities that lie ahead.**

**If we can help further,** please call us at **800-A-FAMILY (232-6459)** to have a phone conversation with a Focus on the Family counselor regarding your particular experience. We would be honored to walk with you during this time, pray with you, and offer you a clinically informed perspective.

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