

"You can know that God is always with you, even if you can't see God with your eyes."

"Why do you think you [or they] are acting/feeling this way?"

"Help me understand . . ." "Give me an example . . ." or "Tell me more about that."

"This doesn't make sense to me either. I can understand how this is confusing for you."

"Can you put into words what you're thinking or feeling? You don't have to pretend you're okay. Even if it doesn't all make sense, talking about it can help."

"What are you reading or listening to? I like learning more about you."

"This is what I'm feeling right now; how are you doing?"

"I am here whenever you need me."

"Even when you feel sad or mad, God loves you."

"Sometimes scary things happen in our world, but I want you to know that God is always with you. And you can talk to God anytime."

## A Volunteer's Guide to . . .

# Talking About Crisis



with Elementary Kids



# How to Talk About Crisis

Four out of six children will experience at least one adverse childhood experience.<sup>1</sup>

→ It's hard to think about little kids experiencing crisis, but research would indicate it's more likely than we may think. In the elementary years, a crisis may look like the loss of a family member, a change in living arrangements, being bullied, a natural disaster, or even a normal developmental change that just feels really scary. By definition, a crisis is a real or perceived threat that disrupts a child's normal degree of functioning (e.g., physically, emotionally, and/or mentally), thereby requiring immediate support.

While we can't prevent every crisis, there is good news. As volunteers, we can help children feel safe and valued. When we help children process their thoughts and feelings, we can help them heal and develop the skills to make wise choices and handle difficult circumstances in the future.

**In this Phase . . .** As a volunteer, your role is to **engage their interests**. By initiating conversations about what they enjoy and following their lead as they engage in activities, you can help them feel calmer and safe enough to engage in conversations.

**Elementary kids are motivated by fun.** Even though you may think play or activities are inappropriate during crisis, kids need fun and play to help them regulate and think through their experience. You can leverage games that help them name their feelings and feel safe and confident again.

## In Your Conversations . . .

### BEFORE

**Stay calm.** When kids we care about experience a crisis, it may trigger our own anxieties or emotions. Allow yourself time to process things on your own before engaging with a child.

**Keep the environment predictable.** When things feel chaotic in a child's life, keep the environment and schedule as predictable and orderly as possible.

**Create a calming corner.** Make it cozy and fill it with things to help them calm down. (Examples: bean bag chair, soft rug or blanket, big stuffed animal, etc.).

**Connect with your leadership.** Before engaging kids, know what policies your church has as far as reporting if a child is in danger and which resources you can point families to if children need extra support.

### DURING

**Let them lead.** It's okay if your conversation lasts 30 seconds or 30 minutes. Allow them to process at their own pace and match their mood and energy as you engage.

**Get on their level.** Some kids feel nervous by direct eye contact, so you can also try rolling or throwing a ball or coloring side by side to see if they relax and open up more.

**Play together.** Use simple games with colorful pieces like Candyland® and Twister® to add an element of play where kids can express their feelings. For example, when you touch something red, share what you love (blue for sadness and green for happy feelings.) Naming feelings in fun ways will help kids identify them later when upset.

**Look for the helpers.** Identify and focus on who the helpers were in a tragedy or crisis (firemen, doctors, etc) and how you can pray for them. If appropriate, ask how they can be a helper.

**Listen and repeat back.** Avoid evaluating or commenting on their feelings, but instead, repeat back to them what they are saying.

### AFTER

**Circle back.** Kids tend to move in and out of grief. Allow them space to process, but also check in with them regularly and let them know you're there for them.

**Stay connected to the parent or guardian.** Always share what their child is expressing, being careful not to offer unsolicited advice. Instead, ask what they need and offer your support.

**Follow up with outside support.** If a child isn't safe, you will need to contact the appropriate people and agencies according to your church and community policies.

<sup>1</sup> Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC.