

"I'm here, you're not alone."

"I love watching you play."

"I'll help you when you need it."

"What can we do to make you feel safe and calm?"

"I'll play with you. I love having time with you."

"That's a good question to ask your parent."

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

"Why don't we draw/color together?"

"You are loved."

"You can talk to God about what makes you sad or mad."

A Volunteer's Guide to ...

# Talking About Crisis



with Preschoolers



# How to Talk About Crisis

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

→ What exactly *is* a crisis in the toddler years? Sometimes, a lost toy or being dropped off at programming can feel like an intense moment, but in reality, we know for most kids everyday experiences are hardly a crisis. A crisis, for a preschooler, may look like the loss of a family member, a change in living arrangements, or a difficult medical procedure. 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 all negative experiences, as volunteers, we can create a safe place where kids feel valued and supported. The more support we can give children, the more likely they will heal when bad things happen.

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**In this Phase . . .** As a volunteer, your role is to **embrace their physical needs**. When you respond to their needs and big feelings consistently and empathetically, you build trust. At the same time, preschoolers may not be able to express how they are feeling verbally, so we need to pay attention to changes in behavior and non-verbal cues that indicate they may be in crisis mode.

**Preschoolers are motivated by safety.** While the words you say are important, your presence with them when they are scared will communicate so much more. By creating a safe and loving environment, you can help them heal.

## 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. Kids have an innate way of knowing and asking for what they need, so allow them to process at their own pace.

**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.

**Use concrete language.** Kids are literal thinkers, so don't use confusing or abstract phrases.

### 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 resources.** If a child isn't safe, you will need to contact the appropriate people and agencies according to your church and community policies.

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