

Just for Parents

If Your Teen Is a Victim of Crime

Teens and young adults are very vulnerable to crime and, unfortunately, become victims of crime more than any other age group. They experience all the same crimes that adults do—from robbery, sexual assault, and car theft to relationship violence, assaults, and stalking. How you—and other adults—respond can make a big difference in how your child copes with and recovers from the event.

Trauma and victimization affect people in different ways, but there are some specific behaviors to look for with your teen. Some common reactions to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event include:

- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- Acting out: aggressive or inappropriate behavior
- Attention-seeking behavior
- Increased risk taking
- Deteriorating school performance
- Fear of attending school
- Poor peer relations, withdrawal
- Physical signs of stress: headache, stomachache
- Nightmares
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Loss of control or powerlessness
- Concentration difficulties
- Clinginess
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Anxiety

Rapid behavior changes can also be indicators of victimization and trauma, for example: a child who was always deeply concerned about looks and appearance, who stops being interested in how people view her; a strong student who no longer is interested in achievement; or a child who now expresses fear about doing something, such as taking the bus, attending school, or going somewhere frequented in the past.

Although keeping a child's victimization quiet or trying to forget about it can be an instinctive response, a victim has little chance of healing from the experience if they want to talk about it with someone but can't. Forcing a person to suppress feelings and memories can damage a person's emotional, psychological, and even physical health.

Things that can help:

- Remain calm in front of your teen.
- Remember that your teen will be aware of and affected by your reactions.
- Focus on what your teen needs.
- Avoid being judgmental. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone makes bad decisions. This NEVER means it's all right for one person to harm another.
- Just listen—let your child vent and don't try to have answers for everything.
- Validate that the crime was horrible and that you are sorry it happened.
- Ask your child to talk about how he or she reacted to the event.
- Accept that your teen may be acting differently, but set appropriate limits. For instance, your teen may be expressing a lot of anger, but it is still inappropriate for him or her to throw things, break things, or be violent.
- Give your teen time to process what happened.
- Help your teen mobilize his or her own resources—friends, teachers, coaches, siblings, and other family members who can be supportive.

Good things to say:

- Nothing you did (or didn't do) makes you deserve this.
- I'm glad you told me.
- How can I/we help you feel safer?
- I love you.
- I'm proud of you.
- This happens to other people. Would it help to talk with some of them?
- I'm sorry this happened.
- I believe you.
- I'll support your decisions.

Things not to say:

- This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't _____.
- I told you not to: go to that party, date that person, hang out with those people.
- Just forget it ever happened.
- Get over it.
- This is private. Don't tell anyone what happened.
- Try not to think about it.
- This is all my fault.
- I want to kill the person who hurt you.

Exploring Options

Explore options for addressing the situation with your child. Options for addressing safety and holding perpetrators accountable for the crime include:

- Contacting victim service providers for emotional support, safety planning, and more information about other resources and legal rights.
- Reporting to police and beginning the criminal justice process.
- Reporting to school authorities.
- Accessing mental health and medical services.
- Considering civil justice options (filing a civil suit against the perpetrator or other responsible parties).

Explore what will happen with each choice and make decisions together. Also prepare for every step of the process. Victim service providers can give you information about what to expect at different points, such as when making a police report or during court hearings. Understand that children, especially teens, may be extremely concerned about how peers and classmates will respond.

Family and Friends

Sometimes the family and friends of victims also feel the impact of the crime, and experience emotional and physical reactions. This is called secondary victimization. If you or any other members of your family have experienced crime or other traumatic events in the past, the victimization of a child may trigger memories and feelings of that time. Explore support options for you and your teen, individually and together. Local victim service providers, mental health programs, or religious organizations can often work with the victim, family, and friends to help you through this time.

The National Center for Victims of Crime Web site contains informational bulletins on different types of crime and the laws in each state. For information on different crimes and their effects, see our GET HELP series at www.ncvc.org/gethelp. For more information about the laws in your state, visit www.victimlaw.info.