

## **“Reaching Out to Kids Who are Victims of Crime”**

*by Jim Burns, Ph.D.*

Unfortunately, when kids today have been victimized, too many adults blame the victim. “If only you hadn’t \_\_\_\_\_,” is still an all too common response. Kids who have been victimized by crime need adults need to take the initiative to stand up and help rather than point a finger and say, “I told you so.”

Some great information on reaching out to kids who have been victims of crime has been created by the National Center for Victims of Crime. This organization has a special “Teen Victim Project” and their helpful website can be accessed at [www.ncvc.org/tvp/](http://www.ncvc.org/tvp/) .

The following information comes from the NCVC website:

Teens 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 bullying. 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 affects people in different ways, but there are some behaviors to be on the lookout 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 or helplessness
  - Loss of control or powerlessness
- Concentration difficulties
- Clinginess
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Anxiety

### **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 ok for one person to harm another.
- Just listen. Let your child vent and don't try to have answers for everything.
- Validate that the event was horrible, and that you are sorry that 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 who can be supportive.

### **Exploring Options**

- Explore options for addressing the situation (reporting to the police, etc) 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.
- Prepare for every step of the process. Victim service providers often provide 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.

### **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 see if you can 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 (had)
- 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.