We live in an age in which difficult issues—such as divorce, illness, death, accidents, natural disasters, warfare, job loss—threaten the sense of security in the home. However, there are many things parents can do to help children feel a sense of stability, security, and safety in spite of these disrupting influences.

How Children React

In order to help children cope with traumatic situations, first we must understand how they react to them. These reactions are affected by the stability of the family and the child’s age and emotional maturity.

Birth to Six Years Old

An infant may express discomfort from disturbing events by fussing, crying, and desiring to be held. Often, all babies need is for a parent to hold them or feed them.

Young children are more mature than babies. Nevertheless, a disruption in the child’s normal routine may cause a six-year-old to feel powerless. For instance, he or she may feel great anxiety over being separated from parents during a natural disaster or in the months following a divorce. Parents can help young children in such circumstances by keeping as many routines in place as possible. They can continue to have family prayers, family meals, and other routines they had before the major change. This continuity helps provide children a feeling of comfort, confidence, and stability.

Seven to Ten Years Old

Older children can understand when something or someone is taken away permanently, whether it be moving from a home or coping with a parent’s death. As a result, they may become preoccupied by the troubling event. Their understanding of life has been badly shaken. They might discuss the traumatic event repeatedly as they try to understand how to deal with the problem. They might need help making sense of or expressing their feelings about the experience.

Remember, their reasoning abilities are not those of an adult. For example, it is not uncommon for children to think they are to blame for their parents’
divorce. Parents can help by learning what their children are thinking and feeling and then correcting misconceptions their children may have.

**Eleven to Eighteen Years Old**

Children ages 11 to 18 may be concerned about events occurring locally, nationally, or internationally. Older teenagers start to realize they are going to transition from living at home to facing the turbulent world on their own. They may become overwhelmed with intense emotions and not know how to talk about them.

Parents can help their adolescent children by doing activities with them that their children like, such as making dinner, playing board games, or playing sports. Parents can also discuss challenging experiences they had when they were adolescents. As parents share their thoughts and feelings, children will feel more comfortable in sharing what they are thinking or feeling. This is how emotional intimacy is developed. Even if adolescents don’t show overt interest, they will be listening.

**What Parents Can Do**

Parents must first recognize that their children are distressed.\(^1\) Children might exhibit unusual behavioral problems such as prolonged sadness or irritability, increased or decreased appetite, disrupted sleep patterns, an inability to concentrate, or abnormal performance in school. Older children may start to engage in high-risk behaviors such as acting recklessly, using harmful substances, becoming sexually active, or withdrawing from family, friends, and social situations.

You can help by knowing how to nurture your individual children.
example, you can teach your children, especially when they are young, descriptive words to identify the emotion they are feeling. Some of these words include sad, angry, frustrated, afraid, worried, and tense.

If your teenager begins to act recklessly after a traumatic situation, listen carefully to his or her words and emotions. As with younger children, help your teenager correctly identify his or her feelings. And be understanding, knowing that the traumatic event may have triggered the reckless behavior.

As you begin these conversations with your children, try to avoid moralizing and expressing anger, criticism, or sarcasm. Identify the hurt or pain your child is feeling and show empathy. You could start by saying, “I know you’re sad that your friend died. I can only imagine how difficult that would be. I’m concerned that you are starting to drink alcohol as a reaction to your pain.” Starting a conversation in a harsh manner rarely leads to good outcomes.

Help Children Process Feelings

A child’s sense of control can be increased by helping the child to process unpleasant feelings. Often, as you listen with empathy, you and your child will be able to identify the cause of those feelings. You might ask, “Why do you think you are feeling this way?” Wait for responses and listen carefully to the answers. They may not come right away.
Sometimes you may need to brainstorm alternative solutions. You could ask how the solution your child is considering would affect others involved. Is the potential solution respectful of your family or friends? Is it realistic? How does it make the child feel? He or she may not figure out a solution immediately. Reassure your child that you love him or her and that it is OK not to have a solution right now.

**Respond with Faith**

As you identify unusual patterns of behavior in your children and then help them express and understand their thoughts and emotions in an environment of love, your children will gain a sense of security and safety.

The most important thing you can do to foster this feeling of security and safety in the home is to build on the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can seek inspiration about how to help your children by fasting, praying, searching the scriptures, and attending the temple. You can talk to your priesthood leaders. You might also consider getting professional help, depending on how severe the problems are.

As you act with faith in Heavenly Father and His Son, you will receive blessings of comfort and support. Children will receive an added measure of comfort and stability as you and they live by the words of the prophets and continue the practices that bring peace into the home, such as family and personal prayer, scripture study, and temple worship.

**NOTE**