

HELPING CHILDREN SLEEP AFTER A MASS VIOLENCE INCIDENT



NMVC
National Mass Violence Center

Sleep problems are very common for children after a frightening or traumatic event such as a mass violence incident. Children's brains and bodies may remain on "alert," even when they are tired. This can lead to difficulty falling asleep, frequent waking, nightmares, or wanting to stay close to parents at night. These reactions are normal responses to stress and fear. The following strategies can help parents support their children in returning to more regular sleep patterns. Small, consistent changes can make a meaningful difference over time for your child's sleep.

Keep a consistent sleep schedule

Try to have your child go to bed and wake up at roughly the same time each day, including weekends. Predictable routines help children's bodies and brains recognize when it is time to wind down and sleep.



Limit screens before bedtime

Turn off phones, tablets, and televisions at least an hour before sleep. Screens and stimulating content can make it harder for children's brains to slow down.



Encourage daytime activity

Regular physical activity and time outdoors during the day can help children's bodies feel more ready for sleep at night.

Create a calming bedtime routine

Establish a quiet routine before bed that signals it is time to relax. Reading together, listening to calm music, gentle stretching, or talking about the day can help children transition from activity to rest.

Help your child feel safe at bedtime

Make their sleep space feel calm and secure. Nightlights, comfort items (such as a favorite blanket or stuffed animal), and reassurance from a parent can help children feel more settled. Children often want to sleep with their parents after experiencing something very scary – this is okay for a short period of time when they are scared and trying to establish normality. However, try to resume a normal routine with children sleeping in their own beds after a few weeks.



Be mindful of naps

Short naps can be helpful for younger children, but long or late-afternoon naps may make it harder to fall asleep at night.



Encourage healthy eating habits in the evening

Avoid heavy meals or sugary foods right before bed. Light snacks are fine but try to limit caffeine-containing foods or drinks (such as soda or chocolate) later in the day.

Respond calmly to nighttime awakenings

Nightmares or waking during the night are common after traumatic events. Offer comfort and reassurance, remind your child that they are safe, and gently guide them back to bed.



Help calm worried thoughts

Children may have racing thoughts or fears at bedtime. Gentle breathing exercises, mindfulness, or simply talking through worries earlier in the evening can help their minds relax.

Seek additional support if sleep problems continue

If your child's sleep problems persist or significantly interfere with daily life, a pediatrician or mental health professional can help identify strategies to support recovery.