The Trauma of Witnessing an Opioid Overdose:

How to Help Children

The signs of opioid overdose are scary!

Witnessing the overdose of a loved one can have lasting effects on children. They cope in different ways and need honest information. Look for signs of trauma and get professional help.

For more information visit: u.osu.edu/toolkit.
CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD

WHAT THEY MAY SAY & DO

- Repeated questions
- Crying
- Changes in eating & sleeping
- Acting younger
- Looking for missing caregiver
- Not understanding the situation

WHAT THEY THINK & FEEL

Please comfort me with love and hugs.
Be patient with me - I'm scared and confused.
I need you to stay calm.
My routine helps me feel better.

HOW TO HELP

- Keep things as normal as possible
- Respond to the child’s needs
- Acknowledge child’s feelings
- Draw pictures
- Extra playtime and attention

CHILDREN 3-5 YEARS OLD

WHAT THEY MAY SAY & DO

- Clinging to family members and adult friends
- Toddler behavior (thumb sucking, bed wetting)
- Crying

WHAT THEY THINK & FEEL

If I ask, use real words and tell me the truth.
Let me choose if I go to the hospital or funeral/memorial.
Keep letting me know it is not my fault.
Help me find ways to express my feelings - like with art and play.

HOW TO HELP

- Consistent care
- Tell stories & show pictures of the loved one
- Correct fantasies/denials with simple explanations
- Be patient when child replays overdose event
- Be ready for moodiness and acknowledge child’s feelings

CHILDREN 6-9 YEARS OLD

WHAT THEY MAY SAY & DO

- Anger and aggression
- Fighting
- Mood swings
- Withdrawal
- Stomach aches & headaches

WHAT THEY THINK & FEEL

Let me know it’s okay to be sad or mad.
Please prepare me for any changes.
I need to know I am safe.
When I blame myself, explain how I am wrong.

HOW TO HELP

- Keep youth involved in family problem solving
- Be flexible but maintain consistent limits
- Be open and patient
- Be aware that youth may act out or engage in risky behavior

For more information visit: u.osu.edu/toolkit.

Information in this brochure developed by Karla Shockley McCarthy, MSW and Ashley Bennett, MSW and adapted from The Child Mind Institute (childmind.org/), The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org) and the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia (bcpharmacists.org/)