Helping your preschooler after a traumatic event

For parents and caregivers of children ages 3 to 5

Your steady presence helps your child feel safer. Start with one or two small ways to connect and make each day more predictable.

Make safety feel real

Stay nearby. Offer a cuddle or sit together if your child wants. Explain who is caring for them and what comes next.

Try: "I am here with you. The grown-ups are working to keep you safe." Keep frightening news and adult conversations out of earshot.

Keep routines steady

Keep meals, rest, and bedtime as regular as you can. Explain changes ahead of time.

Try: "First bath, then a story." Use a familiar goodbye and say when you will return: "I will be back after snack."

Let your child lead play

Try five minutes each day. Put away your phone. Offer blocks, dolls, animals, or crayons. Let your child choose what to do. Join in without teaching, quizzing, or taking over.

Praise: "I like how gently you held the doll."

Reflect: Child: "The dog is tired." You: "The dog is tired."

Imitate: Build or draw alongside your child, following their lead.

Describe: "You are putting the animals in a row."

Enjoy: "I like spending this time with you."

Reduce questions, directions, and criticism during play. Safety limits still apply.

Comfort with steady limits

Slow your voice and use fewer words. **Try:** "That was scary. I am here." Keep safety limits clear: "You are angry. I will not let you hit." Help them find a safe next step. Do not ignore fear or requests for comfort.

Listen without pushing

Answer simply and honestly if your child brings up what happened. Do not press for details or ask them to act it out. When relevant, say: "It was not your fault." It is okay to play, laugh, and enjoy ordinary moments.

Adapted from Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) child-led play skills, Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) relationship principles, and American Academy of Pediatrics guidance.