

HELPING CHILDREN COPE

BY JANELE WILLIAMS

A family crisis took its toll on my husband and me. What I didn't expect was for it to affect our toddler.

Dealing with a traumatic situation—whether it's an illness, the loss of a loved one, a move, a divorce, a natural disaster, or some other distressing experience—can be complicated. The effects of these circumstances can ripple and sometimes crash through lives in unforeseen ways. Sometimes they can even affect individuals you wouldn't expect to feel the consequences.

**WITH
TRAUMATIC
SITUATIONS**



Several years ago our newborn daughter was transported by emergency medical helicopter to a children's hospital for open-heart surgery. Our son bounced among the homes of his grandparents, aunts, and uncles and only occasionally saw my husband and me at night.

Doctors gave us no assurances that our little girl would live, so everyone around our son was distraught. Only two years old, our son had never seen that kind of sorrow before. He reacted with bewilderment and anger. He began hitting me when he saw me. We explained things as best we could, and that would calm him momentarily. But he kicked and screamed each time I left for the hospital.

After we brought our daughter home (a month after her birth), our son's behavior actually worsened. He became demanding and forceful, changing what he wanted after he got his way. He was out of control. This behavior continued for months.

At first, I thought he needed more structure or firmer discipline. But neither helped much. I prayed for guidance, and through the Spirit I learned that my son needed extra love and compassion. I learned that his behavior was a reaction to the situation he was in, a situation he did not create and to which he did not know how to react. I began to respond to his belligerence by simply saying, "I love you" and walking away. When he threw a temper tantrum, I held him tenderly and told him I loved him and that Heavenly Father loved him and that we were sad to see him behave in such an unruly way. Then I told him all the things he did that were right. In doing so, I was teaching him appropriate ways to act and appropriate words to use when he was feeling angry, lonely, or frustrated. Most important, I continued to reassure him that he was loved. After a month, his outbursts became less frequent and less aggressive.

Many people think that when the urgency of a situation has passed (such as when our daughter was released from the hospital), the problems are over and life returns to normal. But it can take a long time to find a new "normal." Even though I noticed the effects of showing my son extra

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When our son's negative behavior escalated, I felt prompted to show him extra love and compassion.

love and compassion after a few weeks, it took nearly two years before my behavior and my son's behavior returned to normal. (Of course, this length of time can vary from family to family and person to person.) There were many days when I sat on the floor holding both of my crying children while I was crying too. I was frequently frustrated and exhausted.

Here are a few tips that helped our family cope:

- Remaining constant in personal and family scripture study and prayer. The Spirit guided and comforted our family in a way nothing else could.
- Being patient. We were dealing with a difficult situation. I needed to be patient with my children, my husband, and myself. I also learned to let go of unimportant things.
- Explaining what is happening to children using simple language. I shared with my son my feelings and how I



Author Janele Williams with her then-toddler son and newborn daughter.

responded to and acted on those feelings. In other situations, especially with older children, it might be appropriate to encourage them to talk about their thoughts and feelings with a parent or other trusted adult.

- Focusing on encouraging good behavior rather than constantly discouraging bad behavior. (At the same time, I could not always ignore bad behavior and looked for a balance between justice and mercy.)

- Reaffirming love often. Telling my son that I appreciated him and the things he was doing right helped tremendously.

Because these ideas are built “on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, [and] compassion,”¹ they were effective for us. Our family relationships became stronger, even through a difficult time. ■

NOTE

1. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.