

A Guide for Parents, Relatives and Friends following a serious traumatic event

What can we say to our children?

Helping children cope with their feelings.

Some of the ideas given below can be shared with your children and might help them understand their feelings a little better. It will be important to express these ideas in words the child will understand.

- This was a terrible event and what you are feeling is quite normal.
- In the early stages you may have been in shock and felt confused and helpless. You may also have felt fear and sadness.
- As you thought about what happened you may have felt angry with yourself, with the school or with others. You may even have felt guilt and shame.
- Often physical reactions follow such events e.g tiredness, sleeplessness, bad dreams, headaches and short temper.
- Try not to bottle up your feelings. Your feelings are important to others. Crying is natural and often gives relief.
- As well as talking, be ready to listen to others.
- You may need to have time on your own for private thoughts- explain to your family and friends they will understand.
- Accidents are more likely to occur when you are under stress, please be careful and take your time.

Individual Reactions

Children's reactions to what has happened will vary a great deal. For some, the feelings of distress will be short lived as they and the people around them gradually adjust to the tragedy. For others, the reaction may be more severe and long-lasting. There will also be those who seem to have recovered but who will begin to suffer later on.

Some children and their parents might benefit from talking to someone outside the family.

All those involved in the incident will have been affected in some way, though each person's experience of the event will be personal and therefore different. As an adult, you may have thoughts and feelings which you have not experienced before. Children are likely to experience similar kinds of thoughts and feelings.

Behaviours you might expect from children

Children may have a need for support in coming to terms with traumatic events, but they might not be able to express feelings when they cannot find words. Young children in particular, often show their feelings through behaviour.

These behaviours might include:

- Increased misbehaviour, aggression and 'younger' behaviour.
- Becoming more withdrawn.
- Lots of 'pretend' play including desire to act-out details of what took place in the original incident. This may even involve the use of props.
- Sleep disturbance, including bad dreams, fear of being alone, and fear of the dark: clinginess, including a desire to sleep with parents.
- Difficulty concentrating especially in school. Children might forget things or have toileting accidents.
- Heightened alertness to danger, including sensitivity to loud noises.
- Change in appetite.
- Fears for own safety or the safety of family and friends.
- Reluctance to talk. Older children in particular may choose not to talk for fear of upsetting family or friends.
- Being easily upset by everyday events.
- An unwillingness to go to school.

Helping children cope

Here are some ideas that might be useful to you as a parent, relative or friend in helping children cope at a time of stress:

- Try to answer questions as honestly and accurately as you can in words your children will understand.
 - Maintain familiar routines and structures such as attendance at school and regular activities, as these provide a sense of security.
 - Be patient and calm, if possible. Your child, or children you have contact with, may behave in a 'younger' way and may become difficult to manage. This is natural.
 - Allow children opportunities to talk about their feelings and let them know it is OK to cry. Do not hide your own feelings from your children. It's OK for children to see you are upset. Explain, in simple terms, that everyone gets upset by such events.
 - Try to treat your children in your usual way. You may wish to be especially protective. This is a natural reaction but in the longer term being too protective can make your child feel insecure.
 - Be ready to listen, but do not be upset if your children choose not to talk. They might express their feelings in another way, through play or in their behaviour.
 - Make time for yourself and make sure that you have other adults available to talk over your feelings and concerns. Your child will benefit from this.
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