

Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events

Although children, like adults, are inherently resilient, they too will be impacted by traumatic events such as acts of violence, natural disasters, transportation accidents, and other unexpected, highly unsettling incidents.

Regardless of their age, or how they interpret these events, children may experience strong emotions including anxiety, fear, sadness, confusion, and feelings of vulnerability.

Parents, caregivers, and other adults within the family can play an important role in helping children feel safe and secure during stressful events by demonstrating calmness and by conveying reassurance.

While the range of emotional responses that children may exhibit is varied, there are some common reactions that most children will experience to a greater or lesser degree:

Anxiety and/or Fear

When exposed to a traumatic event, children may experience anxiety and fear. They may develop a fear of the world as a frightening and dangerous place, or may worry about their own safety or the safety of their family. These emotional responses may be intensified by extensive media coverage and a focus on the traumatic events by friends, family, and the community.

Confusion

Depending on their age, children may be confused about the difference between traumatic events affecting others and a real threat to themselves and their families. Younger children may have difficulty differentiating between traumatic incidents seen on the news, compared to real events that affect them directly. Parents can help by explaining to children the difference between reality and imagined fears, while controlling their own reactions, because children's reactions are easily influenced by how parents respond to an event.

Loss of Stability/Helplessness

The assurance of safety and stability are hallmarks to a child's well-being. A traumatic event in their community can undermine their sense of safety and, if this event is prolonged or is accompanied by significant disruption, it may also undermine their sense of stability. This temporary loss of stability, and possible sense of helplessness, will be influenced by parent and caregiver reactions. Some children may react by becoming more aggressive, more withdrawn, less cooperative, or more defiant in their interaction with adults and other children.

Vulnerability

Traumatic events can be very unsettling and distressing for children and adolescents. Their emotional response may be more intense if they have recently experienced difficulty within their family, including events such as family break-up, family illness, or other major family stressors.

Best Ways to Support Resilience and Recovery for Children

- calmly provide factual information- any important updates about the event and current plans for ensuring everyone's safety and recovery
- comfort children and reassure them that they are safe (e.g. "I want you to understand that there are many people out there whose job is to keep us safe.")
- acknowledge children's feelings by reinforcing that what/how they are feeling about the traumatic event is a normal reaction; likely similar to how other children are feeling

Need more information or assistance? All calls are completely confidential.

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- give them time to adjust, as this can be a stressful and unsettling time in their lives
- help children distinguish between reality and their imagination
- encourage children to express how they feel by acknowledging, validating, and normalizing their reactions
- be honest about your own reactions and feelings, but temper sharing your anxieties and fears
- engage them in healthy behaviours (e.g. recreational activities, connection with friends) to enhance their ability to cope with stress
- help children use creative outlets like art and music to express their feelings
- where appropriate, involve them in helping others (e.g. supporting the victims or the rescue workers, assisting with special community events)
- try to limit exposure to media coverage of current events; repeated exposure to visual images of the incident may create more anxiety and fear
- monitor their use of social media; children and adolescents can be easily influenced by peers
- re-establish the family's daily routine to the greatest extent possible
- try not to overreact; the extra attention may reinforce your child's reaction to the event
- remind children of times in the past when they were distressed and how they coped with it

Be Present and Convey Understanding

There is nothing more empowering and comforting for children than having parents or caregivers that are available, that listen, that convey understanding, and that provide them with a hug when needed.

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)

If your child is exhibiting traumatic reaction symptoms including anxiety, sleep difficulties, or unusual behaviour, you may require the professional support of an experienced counsellor. You can seek professional guidance from an EFAP counsellor at Homewood Health or from a community-based mental health professional.

Seeking the assistance of a professional, such as an EFAP counsellor, can help you and your children build on natural resilience and develop effective coping strategies to support a healthy recovery following traumatic events.

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