



A child's reaction to trauma

What adults can do to help

This leaflet is designed to help adults understand how children and young people might react to stressful events, and to give some ideas of what might help.

Common reactions to trauma

Sometimes, children and young people witness, or are involved in, things that they find unpleasant, stressful, scary and/or confusing. It is normal to feel frightened and upset for quite a while after a traumatic event, even if the danger has passed. As they try to understand what has happened, the following reactions are common:

- Nightmares and difficulties sleeping
- Feeling scared
- Avoiding anything that might remind them of the event
- Not wanting to think or talk about the event
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into their mind
- Playing or drawing about the event
- Expectation that bad things will happen
- Behaving like a younger child in feeding, toileting and play
- Sexualised behaviour
- Becoming angry or upset more easily
- Poor concentration
- Clingy to parents/carers
- Being more jumpy and being on the lookout for danger
- Physical complaints, such as stomach aches or headaches
- Problems at school.

Children and young people worry less if you can help them see that their reactions are normal and understandable.

What can you do to help?

Protect, listen and reassure

Three of the most important things you can do for your child following a traumatic event is to ensure they are safe, listen to their worries and concerns, and reassure them that they are not to blame.

Try to make things as normal as possible

A frightening event often makes people feel unsure of what might happen next. You can help your child feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines and activities as much as possible.

Help your child to understand what happened

Children and young people need a truthful, age-appropriate explanation which helps them make sense of the facts. Even younger children can really benefit from being given a description and explanation of what happened. If your child asks questions, try to answer them simply and honestly, keeping in mind their age.

Let your child know they can talk about it

It is important that you let your child know that they can talk about what happened if they want to. Having an understanding can help the child make sense of the traumatic event, reducing some of the unpleasant, difficult feelings. For some, talking or drawing pictures about what has happened can make it feel less frightening.

It can be helpful to have two or three named, trusted people they can talk to. This could be you, another family member, a teacher, a social worker, etc. Some children may not want to talk to you about it as they fear upsetting you. Ensure all the named adults are informed, able and willing to talk to the child.

Look after yourself

Some parents and carers can experience a mixture of emotions when their child has been involved in a traumatic event. You might feel guilty, angry or scared. You may want to talk about this with another adult or seek more support.

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