

How to support children after a frightening event

Typical reactions to a frightening event

Sometimes children and young people are involved in or witness distressing events e.g. accidents, crimes and violence. As they try to make sense of what has happened they may experience the following common reactions:

- Sleep disturbances/ nightmares
- Jumpiness
- Withdrawal/ reluctance to communicate
- Changes in appetite
- Going over the incident (retelling/ re-enacting in play)
- Loss of skills
- Clinginess or distancing from carers or staff
- Headaches/ stomach ache
- Risk taking behaviour
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in temperament

These are all normal responses to a distressing event. Being upset is normal even for quite a while after the event. Children and young people (and adults) may feel a range of feelings:

- Anger
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Helplessness
- Numbness
- Denial



Feelings of fear may continue even when the danger has passed.

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

Memories of frightening events often start out as pictures and sounds that pop into people's heads when they don't want them to, this is sometimes referred to as a flashback. Memories of the event may bring with them all the fear and distress that came with the original event.

How to help

Keep things as normal as possible

A frightening event makes people worry about the future. When we know what to expect we feel safe, so by keeping to their normal routines and activities as much as possible, you will help children and young people feel safe.

Support children to understand what has happened

It's important that children and young people of all ages are given accurate and honest explanation about what has happened.

Explanations need to be in language a child or young person can understand.

It is important to help children understand what has happened in order to:

- avoid misunderstandings and discourage rumours;
- reassure children that it was not their fault;
- reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness;
- recognise that bad things happen but they don't happen often and we don't need to be scared all of the time;
- enable them to talk to others about what has happened or answer people's questions.

Provide the opportunity for children to talk if they want to

As adults we sometimes try to protect children and young people by avoiding talking about distressing events. Some people hope that by keeping quiet, children and young people will forget all about the event, this may be true. Some children may benefit from having the opportunity to talk about the event when they are ready. Other children may never want to talk about the event with you.

Try and provide opportunities, support and encouragement to help children and young people to talk about it if and when they are ready. Some children and young people may make sense of what has happened by drawing the event or re enacting it in their play.

It may be difficult for you to talk to your child; some people prefer to ask another adult to help, such as a family member, a friend or a teacher. It is important that all adults are consistent in what they tell the child or young person so that they are not confused.

Be honest

Provide the opportunity for children and young people to ask questions and answer them honestly. Many children will need to ask the same question a number of times; this will help them make sense of what has happened.



Explain what it means when someone has died

Usually it takes time to accept the reality of a death, particularly if it is unexpected or traumatic. Young children may not understand that death is permanent and may keep asking if the person is coming back.

In order to avoid confusion it is important to use clear language. For example “Ben has died” rather than “Ben has gone to sleep”. You may need to explain this several times.

Take care of yourself

If you are upset by what has happened, you might want to talk to another adult about it or seek professional support e.g. local counselling service.

Getting more help

Typically children feel upset for several weeks after the event. Within a few weeks most children will start to come to terms with what has happened. However, some children will continue to be affected several weeks after the event.

If you think that a child needs additional support, or continues to be distressed after six weeks or so, you could seek further help from the Educational Psychology Service via the school. They will talk to you about what to do next.

The Educational Psychology Service has produced a document for schools called *Responding to Critical Incidents Psychological Guidance* this contains more detailed information for school staff.



Useful contacts

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care

Tel: 02920 226166