



Helping Children Cope after a Potentially Traumatic Event

All children and youth react in different ways to stressful or potentially traumatic events, and may experience a wide range of physical and emotional reactions based on their age. As caregiver(s), we want to ensure that we support our children in a way that will reduce the impact of these events. Below you will find some typical reactions based on your child's developmental age and what you can do to support them. Remember: there is no "right" or "wrong" way to think, feel, or respond to trauma, so try not to judge your own reactions or those of your children. **Their responses are NORMAL reactions to ABNORMAL events.**

How to Help Children 0 – 2yrs Old	
	<p>Although we think infants may not be impacted by traumatic incidents, they are always absorbing the environment around them, can sense your emotions and will react accordingly. As a caregiver, if you are overwhelmed and scared, your baby may also feel unsafe and may begin to mirror your behaviour.</p>
<p>Typical Trauma Reactions: Most symptoms are non-verbal and could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fussing - Increase in crying - Change in eating habits - Change in sleeping habits - May act withdrawn or be less responsive 	<p>What Can I Do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Try your best to talk to your baby in a soothing and calm voice and try to act calm, although you may not be feeling so - Look into your baby's eyes, touch your baby, and smile into their eyes in a caring way. These simple actions will assist in calming your baby and keep their emotions balanced - Continue responding consistently to your baby's needs, as this will help to develop trust and strong attachment. This includes continuing to breastfeed, if you are doing so

How to Help Children 2 – 5yrs Old	
<p>At this age, children are growing and developing quickly! Although getting older, they still depend on their caregiver(s) to look after them. Similar to babies, they will respond to situations according to how their caregiver(s) react. So if you are calm and confident, it will help your child to feel safe.</p>	
<p>Typical Trauma Reactions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talking repeatedly about the event or pretending to "play" the event - Excessive clinging to caregiver(s) - Increased crying - Increased fearfulness – maybe of monsters, being alone, or the dark - Changes in eating and sleeping - Reverting to early behaviour like baby talk, bedwetting or thumb-sucking 	<p>What Can I Do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make your child feel safe by hugging or cuddling them, using simple phrases like "I'm here for you" when they're scared/sad to soothe them - Watch what you say, as children have big ears and may pick up on your anxiety or be scared by things they don't understand - Maintain routines as much as possible, especially around meals & bedtime - Encourage kids to share fears & feelings by asking "how are you feeling today". Follow up conversations with a fun story or activity to help them feel calm & safe

How to Help Children 6 – 11yrs Old


At this age, children are better equipped to understand and handle difficult situations and can begin to talk about their thoughts/feelings. However, they may still look to caregiver(s) for comfort and guidance. Listening to your children and engaging with them to process their thoughts and feelings will demonstrate your care and commitment to them.

Typical Trauma Reactions:

- Increased aggression or anger
- Crying or moodiness
- Refusing to talk about event
- Academic problems
- Trouble with memory
- Repeatedly asking questions
- Fear of injury or death of loved one
- Sleep or appetite disturbance
- Physical pains: stomach-aches, headaches, feeling tired (which is due to stress)
- Withdrawal from social activities

What Can I Do?

- Limit TV exposure as news footage may increase the trauma of the event. If they do see stories, sit with your child and debrief it
- Spend time with your child and let them now it's okay to ask questions and express feelings. Use meal times to explain what is happening in the community and explore what their friends have been saying so you can correct any misinformation
- Reassure your child they are safe. Use facts and real words like: shooting, died, flood, hurricane, as knowledge can be empowering and help relieve their anxiety.
- Answer questions honestly but briefly. Children ask questions because they are worried, so give a reassuring answer. If you don't know the answer, say "I don't know"
- Open discussion about feelings by sharing your own: "This was very scary and I have been thinking about it a lot. How have you been feeling?" However don't overshare your own anxieties/fears with your children
- Talk about community healing. Let them know things are occurring to increase safety

Quick & Fun Tips to Help Your Child Calm Down

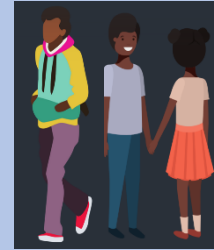
- Have them imagine their favourite place and have them describe it using their senses
- Have them squeeze something in their hands (clay, silly putty, play dough, etc.)
- Practice and teach deep breathing to them using items like bubbles, pinwheels, etc.
- Create a calm spot in your house where they can go when feeling unsafe/scared
- Have them give themselves a big hug

Useful Phrases for Caregiver(s)

- I am here for you
- How are you feeling?
- You are not doing this alone!
- What do you need right now? What would be helpful?
- That event was scary, but we are safe now in this moment
- Would you like a hug?

How to Help Children 12 – 18yrs Old

Adolescence and teen years are an already challenging time for young people who have many changes happening in their bodies and in their environments. When traumatic events happen during the teen years, it may result in them feeling a loss of control, even though they may not show it and may look "okay". At this age, they may also empathize and feel bad for people impacted by the incident and have a strong need to know or understand why the event happened.


Typical Trauma Reactions:

- Constant replaying and thinking of traumatic incident
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Depression and perhaps suicidal thoughts
- Mood swings
- Increase in anger and irritability
- Avoidance of feelings altogether
- Lack of desire to talk about the event with caregiver(s)
- Engaging in risky or illegal behaviour
- Use of substances to cope
- Panic or anxiety about the future

What Can I Do?

- Assist your teen to feel safe again. They may act as if they are fine, even though they are not. While they may resist, offer your touch (hug, embrace) as it may help them feel secure. You can say something like "I know you are grown now, but I just need a hug right now"
- Provide the opportunity to discuss the event, while you are doing an activity together for example, so the conversation doesn't feel intense or confrontational
- Limit TV exposure as news footage may increase the trauma of the event. Although they are more equipped to handle it than children, if it is too much, it may cause them to "zone out" or dissociate
- Youth may feel more comfortable talking to their peers or youth worker in the community than with their caregiver(s), so consider organizing a space for them to do so
- Be patient and let them know you are always there to support them. This lets them know that even though they don't want to talk now, they can talk to you in the future
- Be aware of substance use. After traumatic incidents teens are at risk of turning to drugs or alcohol to numb their feelings or anxiety. If you notice your child doing so, open the conversation by saying "People often drink or use drugs after an event like this to help them forget or calm themselves. But this doesn't solve the issue and it can cause more problems later". Offer other activities that they could do instead, by themselves, with peers or with their caregiver(s)