

Trauma

Helping young children cope with traumatic events

The following strategies have been put forward by various early childhood experts to help parents and other adults give children the emotional support they need when traumatic events occur.

GIVE REASSURANCE AND PHYSICAL COMFORT

Children absorb the tension, uncertainty, confusion and fear around them.

- Try to create a sense of calm and reassurance.
- Children need extra hugs, smiles and hand-holding.
- Reassure children that they are safe and that there is someone there to take care of them.
- Tell them: 'I will take care of you' to make them feel safe.
- Young children have great faith in adults' powers and are responsive to adult reassurances.

TURN OFF THE TELEVISION IF NECESSARY

- For some young children, TV and radio work against creating a sense of safety or security.
- If necessary limit TV and radio when children are around to keep them from viewing graphic images or listening to distressing reports.
- Don't expect that because children are older, they will understand the violence as adults do.

PROVIDE STRUCTURE

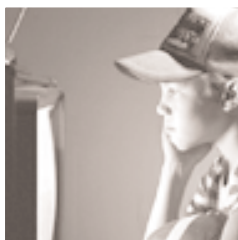
- Children need consistency and security in their day, especially when the rest of their life is unpredictable.
- Although it doesn't make sense to pretend that life is normal, your family has been deeply affected by large events and keeping to the routine of their daily lives - dinner, bath, reading time - can be tremendously reassuring to children.

- If your children are home from school for one or more days, try to keep them on a weekend schedule of meals, playtime etc.
- Children may have a difficult time accepting routines and other limits, but persevere by being firm and supportive. Make decisions for children when they cannot cope with choice.

HELP CHILDREN RELEASE TENSION

- Provide plenty of time and opportunity for children to work out their concerns and feelings through dramatic play. Create props children can use to pretend they are firefighters, doctors, rescue workers or other helpers. Dramatic play allows children to play more powerful roles and help deal with their trauma and overcome feelings of helplessness.
 - Recognise and support their efforts to work out what they have heard through their play, drawing, writing and other activities. This helps them develop a sense of mastery and control as well as resolution.
 - Give them time for relaxing and the therapeutic experience of playing with sand, water, clay and play dough.
 - Give children opportunities for physical activity that provides an emotional release.
- ### BE OPEN TO CHILDREN TALKING ABOUT THE DISASTER
- At times like these children get anxious, frightened and full of questions. Do not pressure children to talk.
- Listen to children and recognise their feelings.
 - Don't dismiss their questions. This will leave their fear and confusion intact.

Media Enquiries 02 9716 2804



Children seeing news reports know that something's not right.

They need answers.



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- Answer questions, recognising their ages and stages of development.
- Be open, honest, clear and accurate.
- Ask them: 'What are you thinking?', 'What are you feeling?'
- At the same time, children should not be pressured to talk.
- Share your own feelings of fear and anxiety in a calm, reassuring way to help children feel comfortable. For example you might say: 'I was frightened when I saw the explosions, but I knew there were people who were ready to help out.'
- Children need to feel that the situation is under control.

- Some children are born with an extra sensitivity to threats and are more easily unsettled and alarmed. These children will have an especially hard time.

DON'T LET ANGER BE MISDIRECTED

- Peaceful resolution to conflict is one way to give children a stronger sense of power and control, especially critical in the wake of a disaster which leaves them feeling powerless.
- Children who have experienced the emotional trauma and violence of disaster often behave aggressively, so it is useful to talk to your child about alternatives to using violence to solve problems.
- Talk about non-violent alternatives for solving conflicts in the news, and to non-violent problem solving in their own lives.

DON'T LET HATE WIN

- A major mistake following traumatic events would be to let hate win. Make it clear that only a small, hateful group of people did this.
- As we learn more about individuals who are responsible for tragic event, adults

must help children avoid making inappropriate assumptions and using labels about groups based on their race, ethnicity, religious background or national origin.

- Make sure your child understands that hurting more innocent people will only mean that terror wins.

WATCH FOR CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

- Children, like adults, may exhibit symptoms of stress following a disaster.
- For preschoolers, this may include thumb sucking, bed wetting, clinging, changes in sleep or eating patterns, and isolation from other children.
- Older children may be irritable or aggressive and display poor concentration, among other changes in their behaviour.
- These symptoms are usually short-term (days or weeks) and tend to resolve with reassurance, patience and nurturing.
- If you feel overwhelmed or if you see persisting problems with your child don't hesitate to reach out for help.
- With children in the house, be careful of what you say in your conversations with other adults and try and make sure the kids are not in hearing distance. Certainly ensure the two and three-year-olds are not around when you share tragic anecdotes with adults.
- Remember, preschool children are silent listeners.

FOR HELP:

Parent Line 13 2055 (TTY) 9.00am - 4:30pm
Monday - Saturday