

Managing tough times: Suggestions for families and staff

There are a number of ways parents, carers and staff can respond to help children recover from a traumatic event.

Talk to children about the traumatic event

When a child brings up the traumatic event take their lead and enter into a discussion. If children pick up that the adults around them don't feel comfortable to talk about events, they will be reluctant to bring it up. Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds'. In the long run this can make the child's recovery more difficult. It is important to keep sharing thoughts and feelings and give children an opportunity to ask questions. It is also important for adults to be as honest and clear as possible about the traumatic event. Children who are not given details or explanations about traumatic events often make up stories in their head to try to understand what has happened. Use language young children can understand and give basic facts. Just as for adults, children often find the unknown is more frightening than the reality.

Some of the ways to talk with children about traumatic event include:

- ▶ calmly listening to a child's repeated retellings of events
- ▶ letting a child express their feelings through play, such as physically re-enacting the trauma
- ▶ helping a child identify their feelings such as drawing the way they feel and naming these feelings.



Provide consistent and predictable routines

Change to routines and the environment can be frightening to young children who have been traumatised. They are very sensitive to changes in routines, transitions, surprises, unstructured social situation and new situations. Letting children know about changes in routine in advance and why there is a change helps children manage their fears (e.g., a new person visiting the home, going to see the doctor). Most children respond well to structured environments with clear goals, timelines and activities. Keeping familiar routines, having trusted people around, predictable routines and familiar places reduces unnecessary stress and helps children feel safe.

Some of the ways to do this are:

- ▶ having regular routines around sleeping, eating, playtimes
- ▶ telling children about what is coming up next and give them details of what to expect
- ▶ being sensitive when moving from one task or place to another, such as ending playtime or getting ready for bed.



Tuning in and being responsive to children

Children who have experienced traumatic events often need help to tune into the way they are feeling. When parents, carers and staff take the time to listen, talk and play they may find children start to tell or show how they are feeling. Providing children with time and space lets them know you are available and care about them.

It takes time to understand how to respond to a child's needs and there can often be ups and downs before parents, carers and staff work out the best ways to support a child. It is helpful to keep in mind a child's behaviour may be a response to the traumatic event rather than just 'naughty' or 'difficult' behaviour. It is common for a child to temporarily go backwards in their behaviour or become 'clingy' and dependent. This is one of the ways children try to manage their experiences.

Some of the ways to do this are:

- ▶ observing the behaviours and feelings of a child and the ways you have responded and what was most helpful in case of future difficulties
- ▶ creating a 'relaxation' space with familiar and comforting toys and objects children can use when they are having a difficult time
- ▶ having quiet time such as reading a story about feelings together
- ▶ trying different types of play that focus on expressing feelings (e.g., drawing, playing with playdough, dress-ups and physical games such as trampolines)
- ▶ helping children understand their feelings by using reflecting statements (e.g., 'you look sad/angry right now, I wonder if you need some help?').

Living or working with traumatised children can be demanding—be aware of your own responses and seek support when you need it.



Managing your own reactions

It is important to acknowledge and manage the feelings that parents, carers and staff have when they are caring for children who have experienced traumatic events. Adults can become physically and emotionally worn out and may feel overwhelmed by the child's trauma and reactions. This can lead to a traumatic stress of their own, often called secondary trauma. The signs are similar to those caused by the direct experience of trauma, although less intense.

There are a number of ways for adults to reduce their own stress and maintain awareness so they continue to be effective when offering support to children who have experienced traumatic events.

Some of the ways to do this are:

- ▶ Taking time to calm yourself when you have a strong emotional response. This may mean walking away from a situation for a few minutes or handing over to another carer or staff member if possible.
- ▶ Planning ahead with a range of possibilities in case difficult situations occur.
- ▶ Remembering to find ways to look after yourself, even if it is hard to find time or you feel other things are more important. Taking time out helps adults be more available to children when they need support.
- ▶ Using supports available to you within your relationships (e.g., family, friends, colleagues).
- ▶ Identifying a supportive person to talk to about your experiences. This might be your family doctor or another health professional.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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Department of Health and Ageing



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