

## Responding to children after a traumatic event: A Guide for Non-Specialist Professionals



### What is trauma?

Traumatic events are those that challenge and strain normal everyday coping abilities. For children such events are varied and may include either experiencing or witnessing one, or more, of the following: a serious accident, a natural disaster, an assault, a violent crime, a motor vehicle accident, sexual or physical abuse, neglect, peer or family suicide, severe burns, dog bites or a medical procedure.

### What is vicarious trauma?

Sometimes children can experience difficulties when their typical support system (parents, caregivers, school etc) is impacted by a traumatic event. In these cases children can experience some of the after effects of trauma even though they may not have directly witnessed or been involved with the traumatic event.

### How do children respond to trauma?

Children will often demonstrate some signs of stress following a traumatic event. For example they may become increasingly clingy or they may return to behaviours that they had previously grown out of (regression). Many of these changes are understandable, expected and entirely normal and, given the right response, the difficulties will only last for a short time, typically between a few days and a few weeks. Understandably children of different ages and different developmental levels respond to trauma differently. The common reactions listed below are presented as a guide of what to expect.

### Preschoolers:

Even very young children respond to experiencing or witnessing traumatic events. Sometimes these children can experience the trauma through changes in parents or caregivers who are themselves coming to terms with the traumatic event. In this age group children may:

- Become more clingy
- Return to old behaviors (baby talk, bedwetting, thumb sucking or tantrums)
- Develop a fear of strangers
- Cry more
- Be more irritable or even confused

### Primary School Children:

Like younger children primary school children may pick up the impact of the trauma from changes in their caregivers. They may also have a limited understanding of the events, although they may talk about having worries of the trauma happening again. In this age group children may:

- Talk about safety of self and others
- Ask multiple questions about the traumatic event
- Want to talk about specific details of what happened
- Recreate the event by either talking about it or playing it out repeatedly
- Have physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches
- Have difficulties in school
- Show levels of distress by being whiny, clingy and irritable
- Withdraw from friends and activities
- Have difficulties with sleep and appetite
- Have an increase in negative behaviors such as fighting, arguing or defiance
- Have an increase in sensitivity to loud noises

### Secondary School Children:

Older children have a greater understanding of the trauma both on themselves as well as on those around them. This age group may tend to deny that the event impacted them negatively, and may struggle asking for and accepting help. In this age group common reactions may include:

- Worries and fears about safety of themselves and others
- Worries about reoccurrence or even repercussions of the traumatic event
- Display signs of withdrawal or a desire to be left alone
- Display signs of wanting to be comforted and cared for
- Want to talk about the event and the implications of it
- An increased desire to be with their friends and peer group
- Have difficulties with sleep and appetite
- Have an increase in negative behaviours such as fighting, arguing or defiance
- Have an increase in sensitivity to loud noises
- Have difficulties in school

### How can I help my child after a traumatic event?

Parents and caregivers often are concerned about the best way to respond to a child after such an event. The parent or caregiver is often aware that the child is having some difficulty but very often they are unsure as how to best respond. The following suggestions are guidelines to help guide your thinking and actions:

### General guidelines:

All children respond well to routine and structure as these provide a sense of predictability, comfort and even safety. When a traumatic event occurs these routines are often disrupted, either as a result of external events or difficulties within the support system. It is important that parents and caregivers work hard to try to restore as much of the typical routines as possible in the time following a traumatic event. Such routines may be related to mealtimes, patterns of sleeping as well as regular activities such as school and fun. A swift return to the typical patterns of life allows the child to gain a sense of comfort that comes out of predictability and tells them, in spite of the event, not everything has changed.

Try to re-establish the child's contact with parents or typical caregivers as swiftly as possible. In addition it is important to reduce any unnecessary separations from parents and caregivers in the period following a traumatic event.

Try to avoid re-exposing your child to reminders of the traumatic event. It is common for adults to want to talk over the event amongst themselves or be drawn to the news or the television to get more information. This can be quite disruptive for children as it provides more information than they are able to manage. Therefore adults need to be thoughtful about what children are being exposed to in the time following such an event. Care should even be taken when one thinks that a child is in bed or perhaps distracted by an activity. As parents and caregivers will often remark it is amazing what children can pick up when we think they are not listening.

If your child tries to initiate conversation or discussion about the traumatic event allow this to happen, and use this as an opportunity to provide age appropriate information and reassurance. Children will often have questions about what has happened, the impact of the event as well as questions about the likelihood of something further happening. Many children will express concern for the safety of others, particularly other children. Parents and caregivers should be prepared that many of these questions will be hard to answer, but children will often benefit from being given brief pieces of information that are honest and to the point. If the child asks a question to which you do not know the answer it is often best to tell the child that you do not know rather than to try to make something up. However always reinforce the idea that the adults will do everything they can to keep the child and others safe.

It is important for parents and caregivers to attend to their own needs and recognize when they might need some time, some extra support or even help. Without sufficient care and attention parents and caregivers can themselves become overwhelmed and consequentially become less available to the children in their care. Therefore it is important to practice positive ways of coping.

### *Positive Ways of Coping*

- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and gentle stretching.
- Eat regular nutritious meals.
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, drugs and excessive caffeine.
- Stay in contact with family and friends.
- Pace self between high and low stress activities.
- Do things that help you relax e.g. walk, read a book.
- Spend time in the outdoors.
- Engage in regular aerobic exercise.
- Get enough sleep.
- Engage in activities that are fun and make you laugh.
- Accept help and support from others

### **Preschoolers:**

With young children it is important to reinforce messages of safety and security. This may need to happen multiple times and on each occasion remind the child that the adults will do all they can to keep the child and other children safe and secure.

Be prepared that young children will often have a return to earlier behaviours, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting or wanting a night light. Respond to these with a calm sense of understanding and patience. Given support and a little time the child will quickly catch up again.

Be prepared that the child may want to talk over the event or may even act it out in their play. If this happens listen or, if appropriate, take part in the play activity and use this as an opportunity to allow the child to express their thoughts and feelings about what has occurred. Sometimes the play can become scary and when this occurs the parent or caregiver can step in and stop the activity, again reinforcing the idea that adults will make sure that children are kept safe and secure.

Attend to soothing activities such as reading, drawing, listening to music, walking or going for a bike ride.

### **Primary School Children:**

Many of the ideas listed above for preschoolers will apply to primary school children. In addition: Be prepared that some of the questions that primary school children will ask will be shocking and difficult to answer. As described above keep answers simple, to the point and as honest as possible.

Young children will often want to talk about and process the traumatic events while engage in other tasks or activities. It is important to strike the balance between hearing them out, responding to their concerns and returning them to their activity. It is important they feel responded to but that they also get the message that the event has not taken over everything else in their life.

It is not unusual for young children to express self blame or responsibility for traumatic events. When this occurs it is important to hear the child out and offer a realistic understanding of the events.

Schedule in activities that can provide a distraction or a time out from the traumatic events, such as art, games or physical activity.

### **Secondary School Children**

Children of this age will often have conflicting and confusing feelings about the traumatic event. They may express these through descriptions of feelings, worries, dreams or difficulties attending and concentrating to everyday events. When children want to talk simply try to listen, accept and express an understanding of their experience. This age group can often benefit from brief education about how such reactions and temporary difficulties are normal and expected.

As with the primary school children, secondary school age children can have difficulties understanding what has occurred, even expressing responsibility and self blame for what occurred. It is important to listen carefully to what the child is expressing and to provide realistic information in a gentle but clear manner.

Some children may express anger either verbally or physically. When this occurs it is important to set limits and reinforce the message that the adults will help them to calm down and will endeavour to keep them and others safe.

It is important to remain vigilant for signs of an increase in self destructive behaviour, including self harming or an increase in substance misuse. When this occurs offer help, guidance and support as well as the option of seeking professional help if the persistence or the intensity of such behaviour is of concern.

### **How to know when a professional referral is indicated?**

For most children a swift return to every day routines, a sympathetic ear together with a calm sense of understanding will be sufficient to help them get back on track within a few weeks following a traumatic event. However some children may have difficulties that persist or worsen after a period of time. Other children may develop additional difficulties such as substance misuse, self harming or suicidal behaviour. If you are concerned about your child there are a number of professional groups accessible either through school or through the HSE that can be contacted for advice. These professionals can meet with parents to discuss their concerns and may even meet with the child to offer help when it is needed.