

# Helping children deal with trauma:

## Information for parents and teachers

This document aims to help parents, caregivers and educators to support children and teens who have experienced a traumatic event. Children and teens may display a range of physical and emotional reactions. They may act or behave differently, whether they were directly or indirectly involved in the event.

Young children can experience the same intense feelings you have about a traumatic event. All children react differently. Some may show their feelings right away, while it can take time for others to express how they feel. It is not uncommon for younger children to be upset or reacting one moment and happily playing the next.

### What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is “a shocking, scary or dangerous experience that affects someone emotionally” ([National Institute of Mental Health](#)). Examples include:

- Violent crime, such as a shooting or stabbing
- Natural disasters, including an earthquake or tornado
- Car accident or other incident involving injuries

### How do children and teens respond to trauma?

Children and teens may show signs of one or more of these behaviours as they attempt to cope with the anxiety and emotions that come with the traumatic event. These feelings are normal.

Depending on their age, they may:

- Show angry feelings by hitting, kicking or throwing things.
- Become more active or restless.
- Worry about what will happen to them.
- Be afraid that the event will happen again.
- Cry excessively, whine and cling to a parent.
- Behave as they did when they were younger, wanting a bottle, sucking a thumb, wetting the bed or wanting to be held.
- Be afraid to be left alone or to sleep alone. They may have bad dreams or want to sleep with a parent or sibling.
- Be upset over something small that would not normally upset them.
- Show symptoms of illness like fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, headaches and loss of appetite.

- Become quiet, withdrawn and reluctant to talk about the experience.
- Express feelings of guilt that they may have caused the event in some way.
- Feel neglected by parents who are busy with other tasks.
- Refuse to go to daycare or school.
- Be reluctant to let a parent out of their sight.
- Become afraid of loud noises, storms or unfamiliar people.

Some children and teens may show **no signs** of being upset. It's possible that they don't feel upset. For others, it may take several weeks to show any signs of anxiety. Teenagers may also experience depression, poor school performance, substance abuse and problems with peers. Some may avoid school, appear confused or have suicidal thoughts.

## How to help a child or teen deal with trauma

Good communication – and your own reaction to the trauma – is important both during and right after the traumatic event. Here's what you can do to help:

### What to do after the trauma

- **Model calm and control.** Children and teens take their emotional cues from important adults in their lives, like parents and teachers. Be accepting. This will help encourage them to address their feelings.
- **Limit exposure to media coverage.** Images of a crisis can be overwhelming. Discuss what they are seeing and help them put it into perspective.
- **Monitor your own stress.** Don't ignore your own feelings of shock, worry or anger. Talk to your family, friends or a counsellor. It's okay to let children and teens know you're surprised, confused, worried or sad. If you can express your own emotions in a healthy way, it's better for them.
- **Hold and cuddle your child.** Children get comfort and security through touch and hugs.
- **Allow your child or teen to grieve.** If your child lost a special toy or blanket during the traumatic incident, talk about it. If you can, replace the lost object. Talk openly to your teen about their grief.
- **Spend extra time putting your child to bed.** With younger children, give them a warm bath, talk and offer extra support like a night light or reminders that you are nearby.
- **Watch children play.** Children deal with anger, fear or insecurities while playing with dolls, blocks, toy cars or imaginary games with other children. Listen to their words.
- **Provide fun activities.** For younger kids, play dough and finger paints can help release tension. Sports, physical activity and the arts offer excellent outlets for children and teens.
- **Ask for help for you, your child or your teen.** This is important if the emotional and physical distress continue. Talk to your doctor, school counsellor, mental health professional, social worker or religious leader. There are people in your community who understand and will help you.

## Tips for talking about trauma

- **Follow, don't lead.** Make time to talk, but don't force it if your child or teen doesn't feel the need to discuss what happened. Let their questions guide how much information you provide.
- **Be patient.** Children and teens do not always talk about their feelings easily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do dishes. Some kids prefer writing, playing music, reading or doing an art project as ways to work through their emotions. Young children may use drawing, picture books or imaginative play to identify and express their feelings.
- **Answer their questions.** Give answers that are easy to understand based on their age. They also need to feel reassured that their daily life will not change.
- **Let them know their feelings are valid.** Children and teens need to feel heard – and they need to know their feelings are okay, no matter how they react. Help them put their emotions into perspective.
- **Talk openly.** Respond to their questions with facts. Clear up any incorrect information.
- **Let teens re-tell the story.** When they do, ask them who came to help and when the teen knew they were safe. This helps them shift their emotions to a place of feeling safe.
- **Discuss your feelings.** Talk about what you're going through. Remember: you can't expect a child or teenager to give you emotional support.
- **Listen to what they have to say and how they say it.** Watch for behaviours that may show they're stressed, afraid or anxious. Show your concern by repeating words back to them. "You are afraid that..." or "You wonder if this will happen again." This helps you both clarify feelings.
- **Provide reassurance.** Say, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- **Tell them they are safe.** Ottawa is a safe community. Home and schools are very safe. Remind children and teens. Tell them how to stay safe and who they should reach out to if they feel unsafe.

For more information on dealing with a traumatic or critical incident, read *Neighbourhood Trauma: What to do When a Violent or Traumatic Incident Happens*. It is available on the Crime Prevention Ottawa website at [www.crimepreventionottawa.ca](http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca).

