Helping children cope with trauma

Children who have experienced trauma – especially very young children – often express their feelings about the event by behaving differently. This is because most children don't have the social, psychological or developmental maturity to fully understand what has happened to them. For a child, experiencing a traumatic event can change his or her view of the world as a safe and predictable place.

Symptoms that children may display after a traumatic event include:

- Fear – the most common initial reaction to trauma. Children can be scared to be apart from their parents or guardians and need constant contact and reassurance;
- Anger and hostility – usually an expression of the child’s fear and helplessness. Temper tantrums and mood swings are common in traumatised children;
- Nightmares – often about scary subjects other than the event. Some children may not want to sleep alone or in the dark;
- Physical symptoms – such as tummy aches or feeling sick. These may be an expression of emotional pain;
- Temporary regression – displaying behaviours from an earlier age. Some children may wet the bed, lose their toilet training, suck their thumbs or generally act like younger children;
- Changes in eating habits – this can include not wanting to eat, hoarding food or going on eating binges;
- Reluctance to go to school; and
- Feelings of guilt – like the traumatic event was their fault or that they could have prevented it from happening.

How can I help?

Fear and anxiety in children is very real, even though they may seem exaggerated to adults. After a traumatic event, it is important for parents and guardians to spend extra time with their children and reassure them.

If a child is frightened or behaving differently, they should not be reprimanded or punished. It will help to take time to talk with the child to help them share their feelings about what happened. Ways to help children cope with trauma include:

- Keeping family routines and making things as normal as possible – this can help a child feel more secure. If possible, keep children with people they know;
- Allowing children to express their feelings and reactions – children will react in different ways so understanding is required;
- Being prepared for delayed reactions – A child may react days, weeks or even months after their experience. Others may never display a reaction;
- Expressing your own fears honestly – if a child senses that you are secretly worried, they may also keep worries to themselves. Admitting your fears and showing that you can handle them sends the message that they can overcome their fears;
• Accepting and allowing increased dependence – after a traumatic experience, children may become more dependent on parents. Give more hugs if they need them or sit with them longer when they go to bed. Try not to get annoyed or frustrated with clinging behaviour;

• Giving honest, simple and brief answers to their questions – try to use words and phrases that won’t confuse a child or make the world more frightening. If a child asks the same thing over and over again it is because they are trying to understand and make sense out of the confusion in their world;

• Looking after yourself – you may want to take ‘time out’ and ask a trusted family member or friend to help out for a while; and

• Giving the child some control or choice – when a child has experienced a traumatic event they may feel like they no longer have control. If a child is having difficulty with compliance, frame the consequence as a choice for them. For example, "You have a choice, you can choose to do what I asked you or you can choose..."

When should I seek professional help?

Getting professional help is a good idea if a child is having on-going symptoms or showing any of the following changes:

• Behavioural or academic problems at school;
• Angry outbursts or temper tantrums;
• Withdrawal from usual social activities or other children;
• Frequent nightmares or sleep disturbances;
• Physical problems such as nausea, headaches, weight gain or loss;
• Dangerous, risk taking behaviour; or
• Depression or sense of hopelessness and anxiety about life or the future

A counsellor can provide your child with a safe place to talk about what has happened and can refer them to other agencies and services, if required.

Ask for help if you have any questions

The more informed you are about how to deal with a traumatised child, the more you will be able to understand the child and provide them with the appropriate support, guidance and care they need. All communities have agencies, organisations and individuals who deal with these issues, which may provide the support you need.

Further advice

The Victim Support and Child Witness Service can assist victims of crime with professional counsellors, trained volunteers, and a network of information and service providers.

Victim Support and Child Witness Service
District Court Building Telephone: 9425 2850
Level 2/500 Hay Street Facsimile: 9425 4428
PERTH WA 6000 Freecall: 1800 818 988

Adapted with the permission of Victim Services, Attorney Generals Department of NSW