

Your Child Needs You

Children who have recently experienced a traumatic event are likely to show signs of distress. It is not uncommon for children to display a wide range of physical and/or emotional reactions after experiencing a sudden disturbing event. Children may likely act or behave differently whether they were directly or indirectly involved in the event.

It is hard for young children to understand what has happened to them. Some may have completely mixed-up views of the situation, while others, depending on age and level of involvement, may have a clear understanding. The certain fact is that children in distress need your guidance and understanding to help them grow through experience. How you help children work through this difficult time may have a lasting effect.

It is important to be aware that young children can experience the same intense feelings that you feel about the traumatic event. All children react differently, even children from the same family. Some may show their feelings immediately, others may wait until a later time. Most children will likely be confused by all the sudden interruption to their routine. Whatever their reaction, be assured it is normal for children to be upset and display feelings about what has happening around them and to them.

This brochure has been prepared to help parents and caregivers become aware of the various ways children may react to a traumatic event. Inside is a list of ways parents and/or caregivers may help children cope with reactions to a traumatic event.

Canadian Disaster Child Care (CDCC) trains volunteers to provide specialized childcare that focuses on using play to help children work through their feelings and regain control over their environment following a disaster. Workshop topics include: defining disaster (ranging from death in the family, war, earthquakes, etc.); recovery stages; children's behaviours and how they change in disaster; how we respond; celebrating cultural richness; empathetic listening; setting up a child-centred space; and team building.

This resource was prepared by Dr. Karen Doudt, Professor of Education at Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana, a professional child care consultant who was instrumental in developing the Disaster Child Care training curriculum.

For more information on Canadian Disaster Child Care training call:



Canadian Disaster Child Care
329 - 30 Avenue South
Cranbrook, British Columbia VIC 3K8

Donna Grobell, Administrator
Phone: 250 489 0036

Marlene Mulder, Training Coordinator
Phone 780 479 2648

E-mail
disasterchildcare@shaw.ca

website
www.canadiandisasterchildcare.ca

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TRAUMA

Helping Your Child Cope



**Guidelines for
Parents and Caregivers
After Traumatic Events**



After a Traumatic Event Children's Typical Behaviour May Change

You may notice one or more of these behaviours as your child struggles to cope with the stress and loss resulting from a disaster.

Remember, these are natural reactions.

By showing patience and acceptance, you will reassure the child and encourage the process of getting back to normal.

Young children may...

- Demonstrate angry feelings by hitting, kicking, throwing things.
- Become more active or restless.
- Worry about what will happen to them.
- Be afraid to be left alone or afraid to sleep alone. They may have bad dreams or want to sleep with a parent or sibling.
- Behave as they did when they were younger, want a bottle, suck their thumb, wet the bed, want to be held.
- Be afraid that the event will reoccur, asking, "Will it happen again?"
- Be upset at the loss of a favourite toy, blanket, teddy bear, etc.
- Have symptoms of illness such as fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, headaches, loss of appetite.
- Become quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience.
Cry excessively, whine, cling to a parent.
- Express feelings of guilt that they caused the event in some way.
 - Feel neglected by parents who are busy with other tasks.
 - Refuse to go to day care or school. Children may not let you out of their sight.
 - Become afraid of loud noises, storms or unfamiliar people.
- Show no outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Others may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months after the event.

What You Can Do To Help Children Understand Their Feelings

TALK with your child. Respond to questions patiently. Give simple, accurate information about the situation. Correct misunderstandings.

TALK with your child about your own feelings. However, it is important not to expect your child to provide you with emotional support.

LISTEN to what your child says and how she says it. Watch for behaviours that give clues to stress, fear and anxiety. Let your child know you are concerned by repeating her words back to her. "You are afraid that..." or "You wonder if this will happen again." This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.

REASSURE your child. "We are together. We are safe. We care about you. We will take care of you."

HOLD and cuddle your child. Touching provides comfort and security.

ALLOW your child to grieve the loss of a special toy, blanket, or article of clothing. In time it may be helpful to replace the lost object.

SPEND extra time putting your child to bed. A warm bath can be soothing. Talk and offer extra assurances, like a night light or reminders that you are nearby.

OBSERVE your child at play and listen for concerns expressed through the play activities. A child will deal with anger, fear, or insecurities while playing with dolls, blocks, small vehicles or imaginary play with other children.

PROVIDE play experiences such as play dough, finger paints, or a tub of water. These activities help a child release tension. If your child seems to want to hit or kick, give him something safe, like a pillow, nerfball or bean bag game.

ASK FOR HELP for yourself or for your child if prolonged emotional or physical distress persists. Talk to your pastor, your family physician, a school counselor or mental health professional. There are people in your community who understand and will help.