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# Trauma in Children

Supporting children and young people after traumatic events

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## How children react to traumatic events

Most children will experience stressful or upsetting events at some point in their lives, and many will experience something that is genuinely traumatic. Some children seem relatively unaffected; others become very distressed. Common reactions include:

- Nightmares, or distressing memories and thoughts repeatedly entering their minds.
- Feeling as if the event is actually happening again (flashbacks).
- Repeatedly playing out or drawing the event.
- Actively avoiding thinking, talking, or places associated with what happened.
- Becoming angry or upset more easily, or struggling to concentrate.
- Sleep difficulties; feeling jumpy or on high alert.
- Being more clingy with parents, carers, or trusted adults.
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches.
- Losing previously acquired skills (for example, with feeding or toileting).
- Problems at school.

These reactions are natural following traumatic events, and for many children they will lessen over the weeks that follow.

## Five principles to support recovery

Psychological research points to five key principles that help create the conditions in which children are most likely to recover. These are not a rigid programme — they are guidance to adapt to your own child and situation.

### 1. Sense of safety

After a trauma, children may start to see the world as unpredictable and dangerous, or themselves as vulnerable. In addition to ensuring they are actually safe, it helps to support them in feeling safe.

- Find out what news or social media they are accessing. Help them reduce exposure to distressing coverage, or at least talk through what they are seeing.
- Return to familiar routines as quickly as possible. Predictability helps children feel safer. If firm routines weren't in place before, this is a good time to introduce them.
- The people children already know and trust are better placed to help them feel safe than outside experts.

## 2. Sense of calm

Children's stress responses — fight, flight, or freeze — may have been genuinely useful during the traumatic event, but can continue long afterwards. It helps to normalise this: strong feelings are very natural after trauma, and children should not worry about their own reactions.

Strategies that help with emotional regulation vary by child. Some benefit from gentle breathing exercises; others find that focusing on breathing makes things worse. Alternatives include physical activity, reading, colouring, puzzles, music, or deliberately bringing to mind a place that feels peaceful. These take time and practice — they are not a quick fix.

## 3. Sense of connection

After trauma, children can feel very isolated. Friends and family may pull back, unsure what to say, which can deepen that sense of isolation. Connection and social support are not antidotes to trauma, but they form a crucial part of the environment in which recovery is most likely. Actively supporting children to stay connected to others — and making sure they feel supported by you — makes a significant difference.

## 4. Sense of control

Traumatic events often strip away a child's sense of being able to make decisions about what happens to them. Feelings of helplessness can have a profound impact — if they don't believe their actions make any difference, they may stop trying. Giving children choices, however small, and helping them identify things in their lives they do have control over, can begin to restore that sense of agency.

## 5. Sense of optimism

Trauma can rob children of any sense that their future will be positive, leading to negative thinking, catastrophising, and low mood. Very small steps can help — making a small plan for something to look forward to, for example, can begin to interrupt negative thinking patterns. Introduce this gently and gradually: too much too soon may make a child feel misunderstood.

## Helping children make sense of what happened

Some parents avoid talking about a traumatic event, hoping the child will forget it. In practice, children quickly learn who doesn't want to talk, and are left trying to make sense of things alone. Without an honest, age-appropriate explanation, they may fill the gap with their own interpretation — which can be worse than the reality. They may believe the event was their fault, or that it will happen again at any time.

Talking with children — carefully, sensitively, and at the right moment — can help shed light on their thinking and develop more balanced views. Create opportunities and offer encouragement to talk when they are ready, rather than forcing it. Find out what their questions are, and answer them honestly and at their pace.

## **When to seek more help**

If things are not improving several weeks after an event, or if distress is significant, speak with your GP or a professional at school. If a child is harming themselves or expressing suicidal thoughts, seek additional help immediately. If there is immediate risk to safety, contact the hospital emergency department or call 999.

Further reading: *Helping Your Child with Loss and Trauma: A Self-Help Guide for Parents* provides more in-depth guidance for parents and carers.