

Supporting children affected by a Critical Incident



Children may not experience strong emotions during and after an event such as a critical incident, yet may not always know how to express and manage these emotions in the way that adults do. Often, children will present with symptoms different to what we expect from adults.

Children respond to frightening events in many different ways. No matter how much we want to, we can't protect children from experiencing strong emotions and distress due to a critical incident.

The way adults react and respond to a critical incident is important for children. Children are aware of their parent's responses and reactions most of the time, but they can be particularly sensitive after a major event. After a major event their lives will not be the same. Children can feel overwhelmed, distressed or anxious even if they haven't been directly impacted.

Children may have to cope with:

- A sense of unreality, which may stay with them for a long time.
- A sense of feeling unsafe and that nothing is the same as it was before.
- A changed family and circumstances - they might have lost special people or possessions and they may also have to make other changes, for example take on new responsibilities or move to a different house or school.
- Unfamiliar feelings, such as fear, anger and sadness, with which they have little experience.

There are a number of common reactions your children may experience. These may last for a few days or for a few months, but they will gradually reduce over time. The type of response and reaction will also depend on their age and stage of development, how close they are to the event and the support available to them. Children may experience:

- Fearfulness, especially at night or when separated from their parents or others close to them.
- Disturbed sleep, frequent waking, nightmares.

- Bed wetting.
- Changes in eating habits.
- An increase in attention seeking behaviour and an increase in naughtiness or misbehaviour.
- Clinging, dependent behaviour.
- Forgetfulness or more easily distracted than usual.
- Reduced performance at school.
- Reduced enjoyment in usual play activities.
- Reverting to baby behaviours that they may have grown out of.
- Unexplainable aches and pains, tummy ache, feeling sick.

How to support children affected by a Critical Incident:

- Reassure children they are safe (you can't overdo your reassurance).
- Reassure them you are there to look after them.
- Talk about what has happened, what is happening now and however people feel. Talking about feelings is a normal and beneficial response and helps children to feel part of what is happening.
- Monitor how much your children are exposed to media stories of the critical incident. Children can become re-traumatised by watching repeated images on the television, and it is best to try to shield them from the media.
- Provide information in a way that is appropriate for their age. Sometimes we can't explain an event and it is ok to tell children that you do not know why something happened or to show that you are also upset at times.



- Listen carefully to what children are saying. Young children in particular will not have the skills to articulate their needs or concerns. Listening patiently will help them to describe how they are feeling.
- Let them express their emotions and give them a lot of encouragement. Cuddling, holding hands and just sitting together are all part of the healing process.
- Allow children to behave as children – it can be easy for us to expect adult behaviour from children, and especially teenagers.
- Be honest in talking about what is happening. Even very young children know that “something” is going on and it is easier for them to deal with reality than uncertainty.
- Make plenty of time to be together. In particular spend extra time and attention on bedtime – be prepared to sit with them until they fall asleep. If sleep issues continue try to keep bed time as consistent as possible. Use calming rituals such as a warm bath, a warm drink or gentle storytelling; avoid high levels of activity before bed and provide reassurance that they are safe, loved and cared for.
- Keep to routine as much as possible – normal sleep times, normal meals and normal activities. The earlier you can reintroduce their usual structure and routine the better
- Make sure family roles are clear. Older children in particular can take on significantly increased responsibility after major events and a return to “normal” as early as possible is beneficial.
- While protecting children, try not to be overprotective.
- Do things together as a family. Simple activities are helpful for everyone.

Like adults, most children will adapt and grow through crisis with the love and support of their family and friends. If a child’s reactions are particularly severe or prolonged, or if you have concerns about the way that your child is reacting after a major event it is important to seek professional assistance.