



Traumatic events: first response to help children and teenagers

Traumatic events are sudden, unexpected and shocking experiences that make children and teenagers feel scared, distressed or overwhelmed. These events might include bushfires, car accidents, or the sight of someone who's badly hurt.

Children and teenagers might react in various ways to these experiences. The way they react depends on things like their:

- age
- personality and temperament
- experiences of traumatic events in the past
- support from family, friends and school.

How children and teenagers experience and understand an event also affects the distress they feel during and after it and how they recover.

First response: checking for shock and helping children and teenagers feel safe

Check your child's physical wellbeing:

- Check for signs of shock. If your child has pale or clammy skin, a weak or rapid pulse or dizziness, or if they can't respond to you, this is shock. Shock is caused by injury or sudden fright.
- If your child has signs of shock and is injured, go to your nearest hospital or call an ambulance on 000.
- If your child has signs of shock but isn't injured, comfort your child and reassure them that they're safe. Shock caused by a sudden fright doesn't need immediate medical treatment. But seek medical attention if the shock doesn't go away.
- Keep your child warm and dry.

- Offer food and drink at usual times. It's OK if your child doesn't want much to eat or drink, but make sure they stay hydrated. It's natural for children to have smaller appetites when they're upset.

Help your child feel safe

- **Spend time with your child.** If you can't be with them, make sure they're with someone else who makes them feel safe.
- **Show your child affection in ways they like** – for example, a hug, a pat on the shoulder or a high five.
- **Let your child know that you and other people are there to look after them.**
- **If your child wants to talk, listen patiently.** Gently answer your child's questions as best you can, but be honest. For example, you could say, 'I don't know what has happened to our house. But you and I are OK'.
- **Find a safe and secure space for yourself and your child, away from the event and reminders of it, if possible.** For young children, a supervised area to play games, draw and read might help when they're ready. For older children and teenagers, it could be an area where they can listen to music or just hang out.
- **Give older children and teenagers time and space to talk with their friends if they need to** – for example, online or on the phone.

Stay calm and model coping behaviour

- **Try to show your child calm and positive ways to cope.** Talk about how you feel or felt. For example, 'Yes, I was really scared when that car crashed into us, but we're safe now'. If you can stay calm, it'll help your child to feel calm too.
- **Encourage your child to spend time with adults and children who are calm.**
- **Help your child understand other people's distress.** For example, 'That man is really upset so he can't calm down just yet. Someone is going to talk to him and help him to calm down'.
- **Give your young child a toy, like a special teddy bear or doll, to 'look after'.** Encourage older children to help with looking after pets or younger brothers or sisters. Caring for others in meaningful ways can help children stay calm, feel they're contributing and learn how to look after themselves.

Decide what your child needs to know

- **Be honest about the wellbeing of others.** If a family member or friend is injured, has died or is missing, talk about this tough topic with your young child or have this difficult conversation with your teenage child.
- **Try to explain the event in a way that gives your child the truth without scaring them.** For example, 'Aunty Lena has gone to hospital in the ambulance. The paramedics are using special equipment to help her breathe right now'.
- **Check that your child understands what has happened, and encourage them to ask questions.** If you don't know the answer to a question, it's OK to say so. Tell your child that you'll try to find more information.

Handle media coverage of traumatic events

- Let your child know that you'll tell them if there's anything they need to know.
- Help your toddler cope with disaster news by limiting what they see and hear in the media. Make time to listen and explain anything they've seen or heard in ways they can understand.

- Help your school-age child cope with disaster news by giving them accurate, age-appropriate information, plus opportunities to talk.
- Help your teenage child cope with disaster news by talking with them about what they're seeing in the media and where they're getting their information from. You can explain that seeing a lot of coverage of the event might make them feel stressed or upset.