



## Supporting children and young people after a traumatic event

### What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is an event that happens when you are frightened that either yourself or someone close to you is going to be seriously hurt or die. You may also be worried about possible threats to your child's psychological wellbeing (for example, mind, thoughts and emotions). You do not have to be directly involved in an event for it to be traumatic for you.

### Examples of traumatic events are:

- Road accidents
- Seeing or being the victim of violence or abuse
- Human accidents, such as fires
- Serious illnesses or operations
- Dog bites

### More rare traumatic events in the UK include:

- Earthquakes, tsunamis, serious floods or hurricanes
- Terrorist attacks
- Wars
- Medical pandemics, like COVID-19

Children sometimes experience or are involved in a traumatic event that they find scary and frightening. A traumatic event is something which causes the child to be psychologically or physically overwhelmed in the moment, and so events such as the loss of a parent or close caregiver can also be traumatic for children. In fact, more than half of all children will experience at least one traumatic event by the time they are 16-years-old.

**More information on page 2**

**For additional Parent Tips see [www.ihv.org.uk](http://www.ihv.org.uk)**

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Traumatic events can have long-term impacts on children, and have a negative influence on the development of young children, toddlers, and infants. Like adults, all children will react differently after a traumatic event – but this will also depend on how old they are and how much they understand about what happened. However, the following reactions are common:

## 1. Changes in their body

After experiencing a frightening event, older children may tell you that they have noticed:

- their heart beating faster;
- they are becoming sweaty with clammy hands;
- they are panting or breathing faster than normal;
- they are feeling more, or less, hungry than usual.

Younger children may find it harder to notice bodily changes and are more likely to tell you they are not feeling well or have a headache or stomach ache. You might be able to see changes in them through their body movements and gestures, or if they have less eye-contact with you.

## 2. Changes in what they are doing

As a parent, you may also notice changes in your child's behaviour. For older children, you may see your child:

- becoming jumpy or on edge as if they are on the lookout for danger;
- struggling to get to sleep and being tired or sluggish a lot of the time;
- not wanting to go to certain places or talk about certain things that might remind them of the event;
- not doing what they are told or listening to adults;
- a loss of skills, such as restarting bedwetting;
- problems at school.

In infants and toddlers, you may notice:

- less playful behaviour;
- your child seeming more clumsy;
- a loss of skills, like sitting or crawling;

After a traumatic event, it is common for all children to find it difficult to manage their emotions. This is sometimes caused "dissociation" and happens when children block

out all thoughts of the event to help them cope with what happened. This can make children extra alert of things around them, and they may be clingier than usual. This is because they are trying to be close to you to feel safer.

## 3. Changes in what is going through their mind

Children may tell you that they cannot stop thinking about the event and that it also comes back at night as nightmares. They may tell you that they are worried that the event will happen again or that memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly pop into the mind. If they are not talking to you about what is going through their mind, you may notice that your child now struggles to concentrate or is easily distracted, for example, no longer able to watch their favourite TV programme or magazine.

In younger children, they may find it harder to tell you what is going through their mind, but you may notice that they repeatedly play or draw about the event to let you know that they are thinking about it.

## 4. Changes in their mood

After a traumatic event, it is very common for children and young people to experience very strong and sudden emotions – such as being frightened, scared, guilty, anxious, angry or irritable. It is possible that they could tell you that this is because it feels as if the event is actually happening again.

Directly after a traumatic event, it is also common for a child or young person to experience shock, as they have not processed what has happened yet. This means that you may not notice any changes straight away, but it is likely they will start some days or weeks after the event.

It is important to remember that all of these changes are normal reactions, and most children fully recover after a few weeks. However, for every 1-3 children in a group of 10, they will develop a more serious mental health difficulty after the trauma – with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression being the most common. It is important that you keep an eye on any signs that your child may need extra support during the weeks following trauma, without assuming that they will develop a more serious difficulty. This is called "watchful waiting".

**More information on page 3**

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## Parent Tips

- **Let your children know they are safe.** The most important thing to do to support your child after a traumatic event is to reassure them that they are safe now and be clear that the event is over. It is very possible that they will be worried about it happening again, so try to explain with clear, truthful facts all the reasons that mean that they are safe now. You would want them to leave this conversation realising that although bad things can happen, they don't happen very often so they do not need to be scared all the time. You may want to dissuade them from looking at news coverage on TV or social media, as reliving the event could be upsetting and confusing.
- **Keep things as normal as possible.** Children are likely to be feeling unsettled and unsafe after a traumatic event. It can be helpful to create as much predictable routine as possible. Try to keep mealtimes and bedtimes as similar as possible to how they were before the event. It can help to encourage them to take part in their usual hobbies or meet up with the friends they usually see. Try to be patient with your child's reactions or behaviour related to the trauma, but be consistent with your boundaries. Although it may not feel like it, firm and sensitive boundaries will help your child feel safe. After a child has been through a traumatic event, it can be easy to want to relax the normal rules, however, this can actually make your child feel less safe. Having said this, remember that experiencing a traumatic event can change many aspects of day-to-day life so be kind to yourself when it is not possible to keep to the routine, i.e., if your children go to bed a little later than usual.
- **Talk to your child about the normal range of reactions after a traumatic event.** Children may feel confused or scared about all the different changes they are experiencing. Let them know the reactions that most children experience after a trauma and give examples. Let them know that their reactions are normal and understandable and that for most children they go away after a few weeks. If your child doesn't talk much or is still developing their language, you can reassure them with the tone of your voice, physical contact, and proximity. You can also use play as a way of helping your child to understand what has happened, and as a helpful way for your child to release any stress. Play can also help you to understand more about how they have processed the event. For infants and toddlers, or pre-verbal children, you can wonder out loud about how they might be feeling.
- **Look after yourself.** You may also be affected by the event. Try to look after your own wellbeing and make sure that you are eating healthily and regularly, sleeping well, keeping active, and doing activities that you enjoy with people that are important to you. Be aware of situations which might remind you of your trauma or trigger negative feelings, so you can use different strategies to help manage your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours at these times. Try to find someone that you are comfortable talking to about what happened – but it is important to do this privately and not let your children over-hear your distress or know that you are struggling. In the shock and relief of the aftermath, it can be easy to say things like 'what if we hadn't made it?' or 'what if we were 5 minutes later?' in front of your children, but comments like this can be very confusing and disturbing for children. Wherever possible, it is best not to let them see your distress, although it is ok to let them know calmly that you feel upset about it like they do so they feel their reactions are normal. It is also important that you seek professional advice if you are not feeling better after 1 month.
- **Support children to understand what happened.** It is important for children to be given a clear and honest explanation of what happened that can help them make sense of it based on their age and level of understanding. It is common for children to have misunderstandings about traumatic events – perhaps blaming themselves – and a truthful, open explanation can help correct these. Try to use concrete terms rather than figurative language and metaphors. For example, telling a child that someone who has died has "gone to sleep" can be confusing. Encourage them to ask questions, and remember that children tend to repeat themselves when they are feeling uncertain or worried - so they may need to ask the same question a number of times, until they are feeling more reassured. It can be tempting when children ask a direct or tricky question to avoid it by bending the truth, but it is often more helpful to be as honest as possible. This will also help when they are talking to others about what happened.

More information on page 4

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## Parent Tips continued

- **Finding the right time to talk.** Not all children will be able to start a conversation about the event - it can be easy for parents to take this as a sign that they are not ready or think that, if they start a conversation, it will upset them. However, for lots of children, talking can be really helpful but they just don't know how to start that discussion. Parents can help with this by providing opportunities to sensitively bring up the events, without forcing children to respond if they are not ready. For older children, think about times when you are not necessarily face to face (which they may find uncomfortable) and times when they have a choice to leave if they are not feeling comfortable, so avoid discussion in confined spaces such as the car. Younger children may find it helpful to express how they are feeling or understand what has happened through play or drawings. This is a normal part of them processing what has happened.
- **Talk to your GP or health visitor if problems continue.** If, after a month, there is no improvement in your child's reactions, you may want to discuss this with your GP and request more specialist psychological assessment and support which is likely to be from your local child and adolescent mental health service.
- **If you are in a partnered or co-parenting relationship, present a united front.** It is very usual for partners to have very different reactions to a traumatic event, as well as different ideas about how to support their children. Children can very easily pick up on these differences and it is another thing that can be very confusing for them - it can further complicate their processing or sense-making of what has happened and how 'they are supposed' to react. Talk to each other and what conversations you have had with your child, what questions they have asked and what explanations you have provided – this way you can be consistent in the messages you are giving when talking to your children separately. Wherever possible, try to present as a united team which is reassuring and hopeful for your family.

## Additional Information

### For supporting your child's wellbeing:

- Parent leaflet - After the event: supporting children after a frightening event  
<https://bit.ly/47v1h8s>
- Young Minds guide for parents  
<https://bit.ly/47Ba3Sb>
- The Child Trauma Academy Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers  
<http://www.childtrauma.org>

### For looking after your own wellbeing:

- Mental Health Foundation
  - » How to look after your mental health  
<https://bit.ly/40CFoSe>
  - » How to sleep better  
<https://bit.ly/3sCe4as>
  - » The impact of traumatic events on mental health  
<https://bit.ly/49ze2Rd>

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