

# Helping children cope with tragic events



## Fact Sheet

Hearing about war, conflict or terrorism can be very upsetting for children. It can cause feelings of fear, shock, sadness and confusion. Nowadays with the extensive media coverage that exists in our society, children are exposed to tragic events both in Australia and abroad more than ever. While these feelings can be distressing for all people, children are still learning how to identify and process emotions, particularly those that are challenging.

It is important to discuss tragic events with children to reassure them of their safety and to correct any misunderstandings they may have. It can be a difficult conversation to have, but it is better to talk about it than to leave children to worry without adult understanding and support. These events and how children are supported to manage potential feelings of fear, sadness and anxiety will help shape their view of the world, humanity and their sense of control in life.

### Appropriate age for discussion

Ideally, very young children should be protected completely from tragic events by turning off the television or radio, and limiting adult conversation about the events in their presence.

When children are older, it is not always possible to shield them from the media coverage or discussions with their peers. With school-age children, it is best to discuss the event to ensure they are receiving the right information and you have an opportunity to reassure them of their safety.

Older children may have a better awareness of the event and its context, and may benefit from the opportunity to have a more in-depth and adult discussion about why it happened, what it means and the feelings it triggers.

### Signs of distress

It is important to key an eye out for signs of distress in a child, particularly when tragic or traumatic events have

occurred. Children do not always have the skills or words to express their thoughts and feelings about difficult topics. Children often communicate their distress through changes in their behaviour instead.

Signs that a child is distressed can include:

- **Withdrawal** – losing interest in usual activities, not wanting to talk or play with others, displaying regressive behaviour (behaving like a younger child, e.g. thumb sucking);
- **Preoccupation** – difficulty concentrating, needing to repeatedly draw the event or re-enact it through role-play or games;
- **Distressing thoughts and feelings** – being excessively worried about their safety and the safety of others, asking questions about death and dying;
- **Anxious behaviours** – clinginess, having difficulty separating from parents or caregivers, aggressive, irritable or angry behaviour, sleep problems, e.g. having nightmares or difficulty falling asleep, worrying about sleeping alone; and
- **Physical symptoms** – headaches, stomach aches or other somatic symptoms.

Not all children will react in the same way, and their response will be influenced by their age, stage of development, personality and past experiences. Children may not react at the same time either; some children may seem to cope well at first but then become distressed days, weeks or even months later.

### Support from teachers and educators

Teachers and educators can support children through tragic events with the strategies listed below. Teachers and educators should be guided by the child's age and stage when deciding how best to provide support.





### Providing opportunity for discussion

- Spend extra time with children where possible to give them the opportunity to discuss traumatic events with you if they need to.
- For older children, open up the topic for discussion and encourage them to talk about what they are thinking and feeling. However, if they don't wish to discuss the topic, there is no need to force the issue.
- Listen to what the child is thinking and feeling. Take their concerns seriously and validate their experience by letting them know it is normal to think and feel the way that they do.
- A child may react strongly to tragic events and need extra support if they have experienced trauma in the past. It is important to keep this in mind and monitor these children closely.

### Giving simple, truthful explanations

- Provide children with simple and truthful explanations of what has happened while avoiding any unnecessary details. They may need to ask the same questions over and over as they make sense of what has happened.
- Correct any misconceptions they have. Children can misunderstand information they see or hear, especially when they overhear adults discussing issues with other adults.
- Avoid stereotyping and blaming whole groups of people for the actions of a few.

### Providing comfort and reassurance

- Reassure them that these types of events are very rare, and that mostly the world is a safe place.

- Comfort them and remind them that you and their parents are watching over them to make sure they stay safe and secure.
- Children have a tendency to personalise everything. Let them know they haven't done anything themselves to cause the event.
- Explain that there are police officers who work very hard every day to prevent tragic events from happening and they are very good at their job.
- Maintain regular routines to minimise uncertainty and ensure children know what to expect.

### Presenting a balanced view

- Help children to see the good in the world, by talking about the kindness people show to each other, for example, offering people affected a place to stay or a hot meal.
- Point out all the police and other emergency services who respond to these events to help people who are injured.
- Help children feel they can make a positive difference in the world, for example, writing thank you letters to first responders or organising supplies, such as tinned food, to send to people affected by the crisis.
- Build children's understanding of other religions and cultures by visiting mosques, churches or synagogues and joining in with community events celebrating diversity.



### Modelling positive coping skills

- Monitor your own emotions and think about the coping skills that you are modelling. Children learn to respond to events by observing the adults around them.
- If you need to, take some time out to process your own emotions and thoughts in private or with other adults.
- Share your feelings and talk about how you are managing them, e.g. when you feel scared, you take a deep breath and remember all the police working to prevent these things from happening to you.
- While sharing your emotions, show you are in control of them. Sensing that a trusted adult isn't in control of their emotions can cause children additional distress.
- Consider whether your personal experiences and opinions are colouring your explanation in an unhelpful way, e.g. telling a child that the world is a violent and unpredictable place because that has been your experience.
- Provide activities that allow children to relax, e.g. team sports, guided visualisation or yoga.

### Speaking with families

- If a child appears to be reacting strongly and negatively to a tragic event, make time to chat to their parents or carers about what you have noticed and why this concerns you.
- Explain that their child might need some extra reassurance and this is entirely normal even though the event may have occurred overseas and to unknown people.

- Suggest they might like to limit the amount of exposure the child is having to the media coverage and any adult conversation about the event.
- If a child continues to struggle for more than two to four weeks, suggest they may benefit from additional support from a health professional.

### Sources and links

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network:  
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