

# After the event

## *Supporting children after a frightening event*

This leaflet is designed to help you to understand how children and young people might react to frightening events, and to give you some ideas of what might help. Further copies are freely available from [www.traumaticstress.org.uk](http://www.traumaticstress.org.uk)

### Reactions after a frightening event

Children and young people sometimes witness or are involved in things that they find very scary or stressful such as accidents, fights or terrorist attacks. As they try to understand what happened and “get their heads around it”, the following reactions are common:

- Nightmares
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into the mind
- Feeling as if it is actually happening again
- Repetitive play or drawing about the event that doesn't seem to be for fun
- Not wanting to think or talk about the event
- Avoiding anything that might remind them of the event
- Getting angry or upset more easily
- Not being able to concentrate
- Not being able to sleep
- Being more jumpy and being on the look out for danger
- Becoming more clingy with their parents or carers
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches
- Temporarily losing abilities (e.g. feeding and toileting)
- Problems at school

It's quite normal to be upset after a frightening event; you and your child may feel anger, sadness, guilt, horror and confusion. Children and young people worry less if you help them to see that their reactions are normal and understandable.

Memories of frightening events often start out as pictures and sounds that pop into our heads when we don't want them to.



The memories may bring with them all the fear and difficult feelings that went with the original event.

### What can be done to help?

#### ***Try and make things as normal as possible***

We all feel safer when we know what to expect. A frightening event often makes people unsure of what's coming. You can help your child feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines as much as possible.

#### ***Be available to talk with your child, as and when they are ready***

Sometimes parents and carers try to protect children by avoiding talking about the event. They worry that they will upset the child unnecessarily or make things worse. Some people hope that by keeping quiet, their child will forget all about the event. In fact, children are likely to want to talk about what's happened, and they may need adult help with this.

Talking is usually helpful, but needs to be done carefully and sensitively at the right time for your child. Try and provide opportunities, support and encouragement to help them to talk about it when they're ready rather than force them to. Some children may want to use dolls or toys, or draw pictures.

Although it can be difficult or distressing, thinking about, talking about and drawing what happened, can help the memories change into memories that we think about when we want to. This makes them less frightening.



If it's difficult for you to talk to your child right now, you could get another adult to help, such as a family member or a trusted teacher. It is important that all adults keep to the same story so that the child is not confused.



### **Answer your child's questions truthfully**

Encourage your child to ask questions. Try to answer them simply and honestly. They may need to ask the same question several times, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened.

### **Help your child to come up with a "story" that explains what happened**

The story should make sense, put together the main facts and be truthful but appropriate for the child's age.

Even younger children can really benefit from being given a story to explain what happened. This helps in many ways:

- It helps the child to make sense of the upsetting event and to reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness.

- Talking through the story can help correct misunderstandings. For example, some children believe that what happened was their fault, others are confused about important facts. You can help to avoid this by being clear and open.
- It is helpful for children to have a story prepared so that they can talk to others about what has happened, if they want to.
- Thinking things through with your child can also help children to realise that although bad things can happen, they don't happen so often that we need to be scared of them all the time.

### ***If someone has died, explain what it means***

Often people take time to accept the reality of a death, particularly if it happened in a traumatic way. It's not until children are about 6 years old that they begin to understand that death is permanent, that it happens to everyone, and that it has a cause.

Some children will seem to understand that the person has died, but then keep asking if the person is coming back. So it's important to be patient and take time to explain it in clear language (for example it's clearer to say that "John has died" than to say "John has gone on a journey"). You may need to do this more than once.

### ***Do look after yourself***

If you are upset by what has happened, it may be more difficult to talk with your child about the frightening event. You might want to talk to another adult about it.

### **When and where to seek more help**

Many children feel upset for a few weeks after a frightening event. They may show this in the ways mentioned earlier. But over time most become happier again. Some children will continue to have problems several weeks after the event. If you are worried that a child is very distressed, or continues to be distressed even after a month or so, you could seek further help from your GP. They will check your child's health and talk to you about who else could help.