

Frightening events – supporting children and young people

Most children will, at some point during their childhood, experience or hear about a frightening event, such as an accident, fire, terror attack or natural disaster. Frightening public events, such as the Manchester bombing, the Westminster Bridge attack and the Grenfell fire, are reported heavily in the media and can cause parents, school staff and children to worry about themselves and others. Sometimes children may know someone personally who has been caught up in a frightening event or they may have witnessed it directly themselves. Adults can feel unsure as to what information they should give to children. Whether a child has been involved either directly or indirectly, such situations can make us feel uncertain and worried, and the world can feel like a very unsafe place where the natural order of things is completely disrupted.

How children might react

It is normal for children to be upset after something scary has happened and the majority will show some degree of upset, sadness or fearfulness in the short-term. However, children who have been bereaved through such an event or have directly witnessed it are likely to show a stronger reaction. Each child will respond in their own individual way but this will vary according to their age and level of understanding, as well as their cultural background, previous experience of such events and the support they have available. It will also depend on the opportunities they have to talk to others about what has happened, as such conversations can help them make sense of it all.

Common responses to such an event include the following, whether the child directly witnessed the event or just heard about it:

- sleep difficulties or nightmares;
- becoming more fearful in general;
- having flashbacks (intrusive images of the event);
- becoming more clingy and worrying about being apart from parents and carers (particularly young children);
- changes in appetite;
- becoming more emotional (such as increased sadness, anger, or confusion);
- loss of interest in normal activities;
- difficulties concentrating;
- physical symptoms such as tummy aches or headaches;
- irritability;
- decline in schoolwork;
- irrational beliefs (such as believing they have somehow caused the event to happen); or
- re-enacting the event through play or thinking a lot about what happened.

Some children will show some of these responses immediately but others may not seem to show much of a response until a few days later. It can be reassuring to let them know that this is all normal and that it is OK to be upset, scared, or angry or to have any number of mixed feelings. It is also normal for children to re-enact what has happened in their play. So you might see young children repeatedly smashing their toy cars together after they have experienced a road accident or stabbing their dolls after hearing about a brutal attack on the television. These are their ways of making sense of what has happened as are not in themselves anything to be worried about. Children can flit very quickly between periods of intense distress and calm, one moment sobbing and seemingly inconsolable and the next asking if they can go and play or watch television. This again is entirely normal and their way of coping with intense situations.

Most children will return to their usual behaviour after a few weeks, particularly if they have had the opportunity to talk about what has happened. Some children develop a resilience that helps them cope with other challenging events in their life. Letting them know that their reactions are normal and to be expected can be reassuring and in itself can help to reduce stressful feelings.

Sometimes adults try to protect children by avoiding any discussion about the event. They worry about further upsetting their children or making things worse. However, children and young people are much more likely to find it helpful to talk about what has happened. Talking about the things that have frightened them can enable children to make sense of what has happened and help them become less fearful. Adults can help by gauging when a child is ready to talk and by sensitively choosing the right moment.

As one child told us “It helps to know why everyone in the family is sad and worried because when you don’t know what is happening you can’t help thinking it is your fault”.

What to say

Make time to explain what has happened and encourage them to ask questions.

- Be open and honest. A frightening event can become much more scary for children when they don’t have information that makes sense to them or when people are reluctant to answer their questions.
- Use language appropriate to their level of understanding. You may find it helpful to look at our information sheet on *Children’s understanding of death at different ages*.
- Don’t give extra information – give enough information to help the child make sense of what has happened but do not overload them. They do not need all the details at once and can gradually take on more information over time. Children will ask if they need to know more.
- Stress that these events are extremely rare and that’s why we hear about them when they happen.
- Try to avoid talking about “bad people” as this can be particularly frightening for children. Refer instead to “bad acts” or “sad events”.
- Give lots of calm reassurance.

For younger children, you can say something such as “Something really sad happened in London today. A man drove his car into a crowd of people and some people were killed. There is a lot on the television about it because these kinds of things are unusual and don’t happen very often. Lots of people are talking about it because it is so sad that it happened.” Older children may have more questions and need more details about the event.

What may help

- Keep to daily routines such as school, leisure activities, bedtimes and mealtimes. Getting back to “normal life” is reassuring as it makes events feel consistent and predictable and helps children to feel safe.
- Try to manage your own anxiety so that you can provide calm reassurance to your child about their own safety.
- Give your child opportunities to talk about events and encourage them to ask questions, without forcing them to talk.
- Encourage them to express their feelings. If they can't use words try to find creative ways such as arts and crafts activities. You could make a “scream box” (you can search online for instructions on making a scream box) for your child to shout into; you might provide a cushion for your child to punch or encourage them to try something physical such as stamping feet or running and jumping. Older children can be guided to more structured sports such as football, basketball or gym activities.
- Let them know their reactions are normal and are to be expected after such an event and that it is most likely that they will get much better over time.
- Reassure them of their safety, offer more hugs than usual and encourage them to cuddle soft toys. These can all give further comfort and encourage feelings of security.
- Find time to do fun things together.

Children may also start to worry about themselves or others close to them being hurt. Although you cannot offer definite reassurance that this will not happen, it can be helpful to stress the rarity of such events. If a child starts to ask more about death and dying there are many books available that can help with a frank discussion and introduce the topic in an age appropriate way. See resource list below.

If they use a lot of social media, adolescents and teenagers will be more aware of the realities of life, but much of what they hear may be sensationalised. A death by murder or manslaughter reinforces the feeling that the world is a scary and dangerous place and repeated reference to such events can give the impression that they are more common occurrences than is really the case.

World events

If a large scale disaster such as an earthquake or a terrorist attack has happened in a particular area or country, and is shown in the media, this may have an impact within your child's school, depending on the backgrounds and cultures of the individuals in the school. You can ask your child's school how the topic is being managed within school and what information has been shared so that you can discuss it with your child and address any anxieties they may have.

Support for yourself

If you are struggling with your own reactions to a frightening event, seek some support for yourself. Children are quick to pick up on the distress of adults around them even if the adults are trying to hide their feelings. You can contact our helpline on 0800 02 888 40 to find services that can help.

Further help

Many conflicting and mixed emotions are to be expected in the short term after a frightening event has happened and most children will show some signs of upset. However, if your child continues to be very distressed over a lasting period several weeks later, or if their behaviour or emotional state is affecting everyday activities or causing concern, you may find it helpful to discuss it with your Health Visitor or GP. They may be able to advise you on who can provide some further support.

Resources and further reading

Child Bereavement UK information sheets:

Explaining to young children that someone has died
Children's understanding of death at different ages

Books to read with a child

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

A terrible thing happened

Margaret Holmes, illustrated by Cary Pillo

Picture book about Sherman, who is affected in all sorts of ways when he sees a terrible thing happen, but who feels better once he finds ways to express what happened.

The huge bag of worries

Ironside, Virginia, illustrated by Frank Rodgers

Picture book about Jenny whose worries grow into a huge bag of worries that follows her everywhere. Jenny decides they will have to go. But who can help her?

The boy who built a wall around himself

Redford, Ali, illustrated by Kara Simpson (2016)

Boy built a wall to keep himself safe. Then someone kind bounced a ball, sang and painted on the other side of the wall and boy began to wonder if life on the other side might be better after all.

Someone has died suddenly

Mary Williams and Steve Fraser

Colourful book for suddenly bereaved children and adults to read together. It provides clear information about practical things that happen after a sudden death, helps children understand their strong feelings and gives suggestions to help them cope. Includes guidance notes for adults.

Available from Brake: the road safety charity.

Further resource references are available from Child Bereavement UK.

Other organisations:

- Brake: the road safety charity
Provides support following a road crash
<http://www.brake.org.uk/>
0808 8000 401
- RoadPeace
Provides support following a road death
<http://www.roadpeace.org/>
0845 4500 355
- Victim Support
Provides support following a crime or traumatic event
<https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>
0808 1689 111
- National Victims Association
Provides support for families bereaved through murder or manslaughter
<http://www.victimfirst.org.uk/>
01642 984751