

# *Helping Children Cope After Traumatic Events*

## Introduction

The care of a child goes beyond dealing with their initial reaction or the physical injuries sustained during a disaster situation.

Your child and family members are emotionally affected when the events occur and for some time afterwards.

Stress reactions after a traumatic event may only last a short time for children. It is difficult to predict how each child will react, when the reaction will occur and how long they will experience the stress reaction.

We hope the information in this document will help you recognize the signs of stress that your child may be showing and identify when symptoms may lead to long term difficulties.

If you have questions or need additional help, please talk to your family physician for a referral or call the Alberta Mental Health Board Help Line – 1-877-303-AMHB (2642).

## Disaster and your child's reactions

After a stressful or traumatic event, your child may react differently to normal or other unexpected events.

Examples of traumatic events:

- Car crash
- Death of a family member
- Witnessing violence in their home, in their community or on TV
- Natural disaster, such as a fire or flood
- Man-made disaster, such as terrorist attack

Following the traumatic event, when the child is safe in his home or community, normal events can cause added stress.

For example:

- Being separated from parents
- Being exposed to TV news
- Being exposed to stories of trauma or disaster from other people

The child may experience strong feelings of anxiety and loss of control due to these 'normal' every day events.

## Feelings of the Stressed Child

When we feel threatened, our bodies and minds begin to respond differently to things and make changes in the way we think or even the way our bodies work.

Following a traumatic event, your child may become:

- Agitated or overactive
- Confused
- Afraid
- Angry
- Sad
- Nervous or anxious
- Guilty
- Withdrawn
- Scared of being alone

They may also want to avoid situations or places that remind them of the trauma and have trouble believing or accepting that the trauma actually happened.

## Factors affecting your child's response to trauma

### **The age and developmental level of the child**

Each age level will fear different things and cope differently with traumatic events. Ask your child's physician for guidance.

### **The cause of the trauma**

Does your child feel like the traumatic events were her fault?

### **The child's relationship with others who were hurt or injured**

If family members or close friends were injured, the child's reaction will be different compared to a disaster affecting those they don't know as well

### **The reactions of others**

If parents, friends, siblings or other caregivers are having trouble coping, the child will sense it. This might increase his own feelings of fear, guilt, anxiety, etc. and he may also sense that his relationship with those people has changed.

### **The child's own reactions to the traumatic event**

What does she think or feel about what happened? Was she injured? Is she is emotional or physical pain? Is she feeling anxious, stressed or scared?

## Listen to the Children Interview

These are questions to ask children who have been directly or indirectly involved in trauma to determine their awareness, knowledge, needs and misconceptions.

- Where were you at the time of the event?
- What happened where you were?
- How did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- What were your thoughts and feelings – then and now?
- What did you do to help yourself – then and now?
- What did others do to help you – then and now?

## Helping your child cope

- Reunite the child with parent or caregiver immediately (or as soon as possible)
- Answer the child's questions reassuringly but honestly. Don't avoid difficult questions.
- Don't be afraid to let your child talk about the event.
- Listen to your child's views of things at the time of the trauma and about the events that followed. Ask open ended questions so he can express his feelings about the events.
- Provide consistency throughout the day. It will help your child if she knows what's coming next.
- Reassure the child that she is safe. Let her know you love her and that it's OK for her to be upset.
- If the child has been injured, help caregivers by telling the child what they are doing to treat their injuries. Reinforce that the caregivers are 'helping you to get better'.
- Try to limit activities that may cause or increase anxiety in the child, such as watching TV news or scary movies.

## What next?

### **How can I help my child?**

The best treatment is to recognize that your child is having difficulties that are not resolving and seeking help.

### **Who can help?**

- Your child's primary care physician
- Clergy
- Teachers
- Friends
- **You, the parent**

### **Need additional help?**

If the symptoms are severe or persistent, you may need to seek professional help for your child. You and your child may need to be seen by a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Ask for a referral from your family physician or call the Alberta Mental Health Board Help Line – 1-877-303-AMHB (2642).

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The most important thing to remember is that your child's mental health needs are as important as his physical needs.

Stress reactions are common for most children after a traumatic event. Sometimes those feelings can be so strong that your child might have problems doing things he normally does, such as going to school or playing with his friends.

For most children, the stress reactions to the traumatic event will fade over time. For others, they may continue or increase. This is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

## **Symptoms of PTSD**

Parents should be alert to the following signs that a child may be feeling continued stress after a traumatic event.

- Refusal to return to school and clingy behaviour
- Shadowing mother or father around the house
- Sleep disturbances, including nightmares, screaming during sleep, bedwetting
- Problems falling asleep or staying asleep
- Loss of concentration or irritability
- Behaviour problems not typical for the child, including acting out at home or at school
- Physical complaints that don't seem to have a physical cause, including stomach ache, headache, dizziness
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Decreased activity
- Preoccupation with the traumatic event
- Acting younger or older than their chronological age

## **Taking care of yourself**

Adults can have the same symptoms as children after a traumatic event. In order to help your child, you need to deal with your own feelings and take care of yourself.

### **Tips for Parents**

- Get rest when you can
- Eat when you can
- Take a walk or exercise each day
- Create a support system of friends, family or clergy to share your feelings and fears

Remember, with your help, your child can learn to cope with the traumatic events that occurred and move on in a healthy way.

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