

Tips for adults supporting children and youth after distressing events

We are all shocked and saddened when a stressful event occurs in our community or in the world. These rare events can impact each of us differently. We may feel sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety and anger. Whatever we feel is okay. When supporting a child, please consider the following points.

Take care of your own feelings and needs

- Adults have fears and worries too. It's important that our feelings do not interfere with listening to children and youth, who must feel that adults are listening, are calm and are in control.
- Take time to deal with your own reactions before speaking to a child or youth. If you are coping well, you can better offer children and youth your support.
- If you are struggling, ask for help. Have someone else support children and youth while you care for yourself.
- School boards can offer specialized support such as social workers and psychologists. Ask your school principal if you wish to speak with someone.

Help children and youth feel safe

- Be calm, offer reassurance and explain how children and youth are in a safe place.
- Limit media consumption, especially in elementary schools. Children struggle to distinguish between TV and reality. Limiting media exposure for older children can keep them from focusing too much on the crisis.
- Discuss conflict resolution ideas and non-violent ways of solving problems.

Acknowledge & normalize feelings

- People vary in their emotional responses. Feelings after traumatic events may include fear, loss of control, anger, loss of stability, isolation and confusion.
- Accept these feelings. Allow children and youth to express their feelings. Emphasize that people are entitled to their own feelings and opinions unless it hurts someone else.
- Let them know that their feelings are normal, expected and shared by many others.
- Recognize feelings behind actions and put them into words. For example, "I can see you are feeling scared about this."
- Encourage children and youth to talk to you or another caring adult. Emphasize that you are there to help, and that they tell an adult if they feel, or a friend feels, overwhelmed.
- Respect diverse responses. Some teens prefer to talk to adults – like parents or teachers – while others prefer to talk to friends.
- Some people respond to stress with humour, some of which may be inappropriate or insensitive. This type of humour should not be encouraged or condoned. However, if this does occur, help the child or youth understand why the humour was inappropriate.

Be a good listener and observer

- When children or youth ask questions, listen carefully and respond as appropriately and objectively as possible.
- Let them guide you regarding their level of concern or desire for information.
- When answering questions, stick to the facts. Don't speculate about what could happen. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say so.
- Discuss events in terms that are appropriate to a child's age and level of development.
- You may need to continue discussions. Acknowledge new information as it is available.

Respond to changes in behaviour

Children and youth may respond differently to traumatic events, with forms that may include:

- Preoccupation with violence (e.g. pretending to blow things up)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Aggressive behaviour
- Physical complaints (e.g. stomach aches and headaches)
- Increase in or loss of appetite
- Anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Mood changes
- Sleep disturbances

Identify children and youth who may be at risk

Most children and youth will be able to cope with their concerns about current events, with help from parents, teachers and other caring adults. Some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions due to personal circumstances.

The most vulnerable children are those who:

- Can directly relate to the tragic event.
- Have friends or relatives in the affected areas.
- Have experienced a recent death in the family.
- Have a history of depression, anxiety disorders or other trauma.
- Have recently come from a country where they experienced armed conflict.

Keep communication open between home and school

- Be sure to reach out from home to school, and from school to home so that all adults know if a child is experiencing stress at school. Schools have resources that can help.