

# TIP SHEET FOR ADULTS SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFTER A DISTRESSING EVENT

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.

## **How can emotion coaching help?**

- Emotion Coaching is a communication strategy, which can help to calm the brain, regulate emotions and behaviours, and help children and youth to feel heard. It involves two steps: 1) validation and 2) support.
- Validation is an acknowledgement of another's experience, point of view, thoughts, emotions, or behaviours.
- Validation requires us to set aside our perceptions while communicating our understanding of their experience.
- Validation is proving that you are trying to understand – but from their point of view, as if you were in their shoes.

## **Acknowledge and validate emotions**

- 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. For example, "It makes sense that you are feeling worried because a scary event just occurred and that has an impact of all of us".
- 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 trusted adult. Emphasize that you are there to help, and that they should tell an adult if they feel, or a friend feels, overwhelmed.
- Respect diverse responses. Some teens prefer to talk to adults – like caregivers or educators – while others prefer to talk to friends.

## **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. Do not 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 or youth's age and level of development.
- You may need to continue discussions. Acknowledge new information as it is available.

## **Support: 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

[Emotion Coaching Cheat Sheet for Parents and Caregivers](#)

## **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 caregivers, educators, 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.

## **Consider reaching out for additional support if:**

- If you or your child's distress lasts more than 2-24 weeks
- Anxiety is interfering with daily life
- You or they express persistent fear about going to school
- Your or they show withdrawal, nightmares, or major mood changes

## **If you have concerns about your child or youth, help is available:**

- [Community Supports and Mental Health Resources for Parents and Caregivers](#)
- [Community Supports and Mental Health Resources for Students](#)