



**UK TRAUMA**  
COUNCIL

# Supporting Children and Young People After Potentially Traumatic Events

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If you've come to these pages, it's likely that you are looking for ways to support a child or young person after a very difficult or distressing event.

Whether you are a parent, carer or trusted adult, the fact that you're here, thinking about how to support the child, already shows how much you care. Just being present, calm and thoughtful can make a big difference in helping a child feel safe again.

You may also be directly impacted by the event yourself or may be affected by knowing that something awful has happened to the child. Take care of yourself and use the information in Question 10 for more ideas about self-care.

Below are practical, evidence-informed suggestions to support school-aged children and young people in the first days and weeks following a frightening and distressing event, this might have happened to an individual child or family, a whole group or even a whole community. All the ideas outlined here still apply even if something traumatic already happened to the child before this event. Babies and very young children can of course also be affected in similar ways, and while many of the ideas are relevant to children of all ages, some will need adapting for the very young.

Read more about supporting the very young Trauma and children – newborns to two years | Better Health Channel (Webpage) Victoria state government

We hope the information here will reassure you about what you are already doing and provide clear guidance on other ways to support recovery, based on current evidence\*.

\* A note on the evidence base: The evidence on what best supports children after traumatic events is still developing, in part because it is not ethical or moral to run randomised studies that deliberately withhold support to certain children. The suggestions offered here are grounded in the best available evidence and clinical understanding and have been shaped by those with lived experience.







## 01

# What makes an event potentially traumatic?



A traumatic event is an experience that was very frightening or overwhelming and leaves someone struggling to cope emotionally. Some events can be upsetting at the time, but once the events are over, the child's reactions decrease, and they are no longer affected.

Traumatic events may be single events, such as serious accidents, assaults or natural disasters. Or they may be multiple or lasting events such as domestic abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or racial abuse.

**Important things to bear in mind:**

- Every child is different. What is traumatic to one child may not be to another.
- Children don't have to experience something directly for it to affect them. They may be impacted by seeing or hearing about distressing events happening to others, particularly if they care about the people involved.
- All the ideas outlined here still apply even if something traumatic already happened to the child before this event
- They can also be affected by the longer-term impacts of trauma within their families or communities, such as oppression, exclusion, discrimination or war.
- Even when something truly awful has happened to a child this doesn't determine their future. There are many things you can do to give them the best chance of adjusting and rebuilding after distressing events.





## 02

## What might I expect from a child who has experienced traumatic events?

Many children won't be affected by what happened at all or may show signs of distress at first but recover very quickly. Others may struggle straight away and continue to find things difficult, and a smaller number of children might seem fine at first but begin to struggle later on. A child's reactions can also be subtle or expressed in ways that don't obviously link back to the traumatic event.

On the right are some common responses in children and young people.

These are natural reactions to a frightening experience and usually fade soon after the event. While children may express them differently across cultures, they are widely recognised worldwide.

### Changes in thoughts and feelings:

- feeling worried, frightened, or unsafe
- experiencing intrusive or unwanted memories of the event, or experiencing nightmares
- being more easily upset, overwhelmed, angry, irritable, or feeling low

### Changes in physical health and wellbeing:

- feeling more tired, having trouble sleeping
- unexplained physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches
- changes in appetite or eating behaviours

### Changes in behaviour:

- changes in behaviour (for example, becoming more withdrawn, more impulsive, or taking more risks)
- difficulties concentrating or keeping up with schoolwork
- avoiding reminders of the event (such as certain people, places, or situations)
- withdrawing from school, family, friends, or activities they used to enjoy
- acting in younger ways (for example, bedwetting or not wanting to be apart from you)
- regularly playing or drawing about the event or themes linked to it
- talking negatively about themselves



## 03

## How do I support the child or young person after a traumatic event?

You don't need to have all the answers. Simply being present, calm, patient and consistent can make a meaningful difference in helping a child feel safe again. It is also never too late to start supporting a child.

While every child's recovery journey is unique, you can support them by helping them feel safe, calm, connected, in control, and hopeful.\*\*

**Safe:** Provide structure and routine through regular mealtimes, bedtimes, and school (where possible). While it's natural to want to protect the child, familiar routines can help restore a sense of safety and normality. Offer honest, age-appropriate explanations and answers to help them make sense of what happened.

**Calm:** Strong emotions are natural after frightening events. Let them know it's understandable to feel sad, angry or scared and that these feelings, although they can feel frightening, aren't dangerous. Stay present and offer gentle reassurance. You could invite them to use some techniques or activities that help them cope with their emotions and relax. This might include breathing techniques, hand massage, squeezing a favourite toy, sound, music or physical activity.

**Connected:** Try to spend some quality time with the child and join in activities they enjoy. Encourage them to spend time with others that help them feel supported. Be open and available to talk and listen and if they have any questions and answer them honestly and appropriately for their age and understanding.

**In control:** Although it is understandable to want to protect a child when something very difficult has happened, look for opportunities for them to have some responsibilities. You can also invite them to make some decisions about their everyday life to help give them a sense of control. This will all help them to see and feel that they are coping.

**Hopeful:** Remind them that adjusting takes time and reassure them that they won't feel like this forever. Celebrate small steps forward, like returning to school or joining activities but being aware that recovery often has ups and downs.

\*\*The principles referred to are based on research about what helps after trauma from Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P., Bell, C. C., Bryant, R. A., Brymer, M. J., Friedman, M. J., Friedman, M., Gersons, B. P., de Jong, J. T., Layne, C. M., Maguen, S., Neria, Y., Norwood, A. E., Pynoos, R. S., Reissman, D., Ruzek, J. I., Shalev, A. Y., Solomon, Z., Steinberg, A. M., & Ursano, R. J. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70(4), 283–369. <https://doi.org/10.1521/psyc.2007.70.4.283>



Traumatic events can sometimes overwhelm and disrupt many areas of life such as family relationships, school life, or your whole community, making it harder to support a child in the way you might want, especially if normal support structures are limited. Although it will probably be more difficult, some of the ideas outlined above can still really help.

Babies and very young children can of course also be affected in similar ways, and while many of the ideas are relevant to children of all ages, some will need adapting for the very young.

### Further resources:

**PDF** [Supporting children and young people after major trauma](#), After the Event website

**WEBPAGE** [Trauma and children-newborns to two years](#) Victoria state government

**BOOK** [Supporting children through loss and trauma](#), After the Event

**WEBPAGE** [What schools and further education settings can do to support children and young people](#), Anna Freud

**PDF** [Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A guide for parents and professionals](#), New York University Child Study Centre

**WEBPAGE** [Helping children who have been affected by war](#) Centre for Lebanese Studies

### For age-specific tips:

**PDF** [Tips for parents of older children and/or teenagers](#) Child Trauma Recovery

**PDF** [Tips for parents with younger children](#) Child Trauma Recovery





## 04

# Should I encourage the young person to talk about what happened?

Not every child will want to talk about the event, and that's ok. Some may share their experience soon after it happens, others may take longer, and some may never feel the need to. What matters most is creating a calm, supportive environment where they know they can talk if and when they're ready.

## Getting a conversation started:

If adults say nothing at all children may take that as a signal that this is a 'no go' conversation so you might try some prompts to open up conversation naturally and without pressure. You'll use the words and style that are right for you, but it might go something like this:

*"I've been wondering about how you are doing since..."*

*"Are there things I can do that might help you with how you're feeling?"*

*"I've been thinking about what happened, how about you?"*

*"Even if it feels hard to talk about what happened, I am here to listen, whether that's today, next week or anytime. I'm here."*

*"Sometimes I notice that you look a bit worried/stressed/upset. Can I ask you about that?"*

## Choosing who to talk with:

Children often value having control over when, how, and with whom they talk. Some may prefer to speak with someone outside the family, such as a teacher or other trusted adult, especially if they're trying to protect those at home from further worry. Sometimes, feelings of shame, guilt, or worry about upsetting others can make it harder for them to open up.

## Further resources:

**WEBPAGE** [Talking to children or teenagers](#), Young Minds

**PDF** [Why it's good to talk](#), Child Trauma Recovery

**WEBPAGE** [Creating space to talk](#), Child Trauma Recovery

**PDF** [Conversation starters](#), Young Minds

## Responding if they do decide to talk:

- Listen patiently and let them share in their own way, without interrupting or rushing to fix things.
- Ask gentle questions about how they are feeling or coping.
- Remain calm, listen with care, and repeat back what you've heard to show understanding. Simple responses like "I hear you" or "that sounds really tough" can help reassure them that you are listening, and you understand.
- Look out for and follow clues that the child has had enough of the conversation for now- some children may only cope with short conversations.





## 05

## What responses might children find less helpful?



When a child or young person is going through something difficult, it's completely natural to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing. Most of us respond in the best way we can, with the knowledge and resources we have available to us at the time. This section isn't about judgement. It's here to help you understand what might make things harder for a child, and to guide you toward things that can support their recovery instead.

Here are a few common responses that may **not** be as helpful as we hope:



**Dismissing their feelings:** Saying things like "you're fine" or "don't worry" is often meant to reassure children, but it can leave them feeling unheard or misunderstood. Such responses might close down discussion. Instead, you could let them know their feelings are valid (even if you don't fully understand them). This can help them feel safer and more supported.

**Trying to make them talk when they don't want to:** We often want to help by encouraging children to open up, but some need more time, and others may not want or need to ever talk about what happened. Gently let them know you're there if and when they do want to talk.

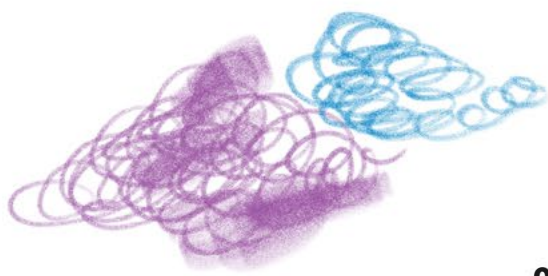
**Minimising their experience or comparing it to others:** Young people told us that phrases such as "it could have been worse" can make them feel that their feelings don't matter. For a child, their experience can feel like the weight of the world, no matter how it compares to other situations. Young people mentioned that positive thinking or gratitude can be helpful, but mostly when it comes from the young person themselves. In some cultures, words and phrases meant to give hope may be misunderstood, so it's important to listen and check how your words are received.

**Overprotecting them or avoiding normal routines:** After something frightening, it's natural to want to shield children, but keeping up familiar routines and encouraging everyday activities can help children feel safe and bring back a sense of normality.

**Expecting things to 'go back to normal'.** For some children and families this might be true, but some traumatic events are so profound that this feels impossible and that's understandable. Families have told us they have found it more helpful to think about finding a new normal as they all adjust and find a way forward.







06

## What if the child has additional needs or a disability?

Children with additional needs or disabilities may need extra support after a traumatic event. While their reactions to trauma may look different, the same key principles still apply: they are a child first and like all children, they need to feel safe, supported and understood.

You know the child best – how they communicate, what helps them feel calm and safe, and what works for them day-to-day. This puts you in a strong position to support them through this difficult time.

On the right are some things you might want to consider.

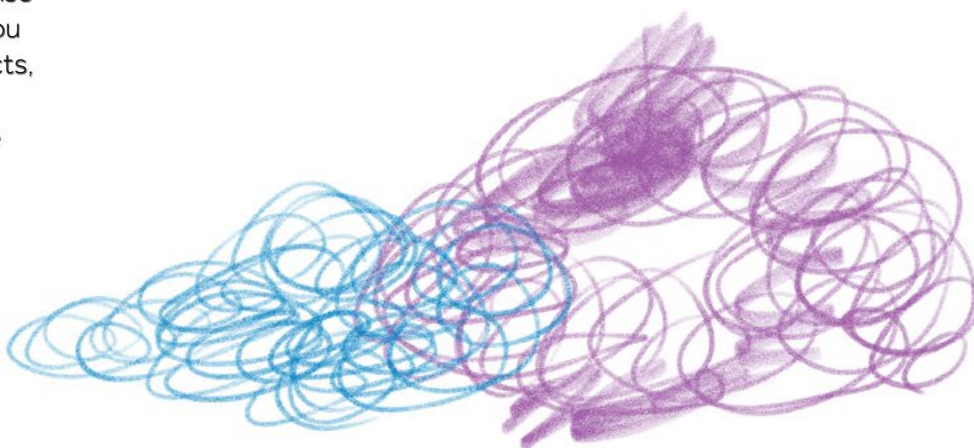
There is no single “right” way to respond to trauma, so try not to worry if the child’s response looks different from what you expected. Trust your instincts, and don’t hesitate to seek additional support if you are worried.

**Support their communication needs:** Even when there are challenges to explaining difficult things, children with additional needs and disabilities still need information to help them feel more safe. If it’s hard for the child to make sense of what’s happened, think about the ways they best take in and understand information. You may choose to use visuals, simple language, stories, or printed resources to help explain what’s happened in a way that feels accessible to them.

**Allow extra time and space:** They may need longer to process what has happened and express how they feel, especially if communication is difficult. They may need you to revisit and repeat any explanations as they seek to make sense of events.

**Look out for changes in behaviour:** The child’s response will be individual to them. It can help to look out for changes for example in their typical sleep, appetite, mood, or interactions, as these may be signs they are struggling to cope with the impact of the event.

**Draw on the people, places, and activities** that usually bring them comfort—for example, taking a bath, spending time with a grandparent or cousin, enjoying sensory play, or playing a favourite game. Familiar routines and experiences can be especially soothing.





## 07

## How do I help the child if the event is being shown on social media or reported on the news?

At times, a child or young person may be exposed to increased reminders of a traumatic experience, particularly if it's being reported on the news or shared on social media. They may also come across other events online that have similarities to their own experience. These reminders can understandably stir up strong emotions, even long after the event.

### How you can help:

Social media often focuses on the most distressing or dramatic elements of a story. It is natural to want to protect children by limiting what they see, but this can be difficult, especially with older children and teenagers.

Try to focus on keeping the conversation open and talking openly together rather than trying to block access completely. This will help the child to process what they have seen and feel less alone.

Ask about what they've seen or heard and whether there was anything they found confusing or particularly upsetting.

Listen to how it made them feel. Gently correct anything that is inaccurate. Reassure them that it's okay to feel upset.

Invite them to think about how they could have time away from social media, or limit their exposure to distressing content.

Encourage them to find positive, uplifting content that supports their wellbeing: Young people told us that social media, if used in a positive way, can help them feel less isolated and more connected to others who have gone through similar experiences.

## 08

## When should I seek further support for the child or young person?

It's normal for children and young people to feel or act differently after experiencing certain events, especially in the first few weeks. And it is really hard to provide an exact time frame for when further support is needed as healing takes time. While it can feel difficult to wait if a child is distressed, very often their initial difficulties will improve with the right support. However, there are situations where seeking additional support can be very helpful.

**You might want to consider seeking additional support if:**

- Around a month after the traumatic event, the child or young person is still very distressed and finding it hard to get on with their everyday life (this doesn't mean they should be 'over it' by this point, but that the distress has often eased enough for daily routines to feel manageable).
- Their difficulties are significantly affecting their daily life, for example if they're struggling to attend school, withdrawing from friends, finding it hard to manage everyday activities and you are noticing that things might be getting worse rather than easier.

If you're ever worried that a child is at immediate risk of harm, or they are expressing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, it's important to act quickly. If you are in the UK, call 111 (option 2) or visit your nearest Accident & Emergency (A&E) department for urgent help.





## 09

## Where can I go for support for the child or young person?

If you are worried that a child or young person is still very distressed after a month or so, you can consider the options on the right.

When looking for help, it is natural to explore a range of options including those connected to faith, cultural traditions, or personal beliefs. Parents have emphasised how these can be an important source of comfort and healing. If you choose to access a professional service, it's a good idea to make sure they offer help that is supported by evidence and research. This gives the child the best chance of lasting change, while still allowing space for the approaches that matter most to you and your family.

- **Speak to your GP** for advice and guidance on what support is available. If the child is under aged 18, they will likely be referred to the local NHS mental health services such as CAMHS. There may also be different local arrangements that mean you can refer the child directly, or you may receive some support whilst you wait for an appointment. If they are over 18, your GP can advise on adult mental health services in your area.
- **Let the child's school or college know** about your concerns, as they may have support pathways or staff already in place that your child can use.
- **For urgent help in the UK**, call 111 option 2 or go to your local A&E department







## 10

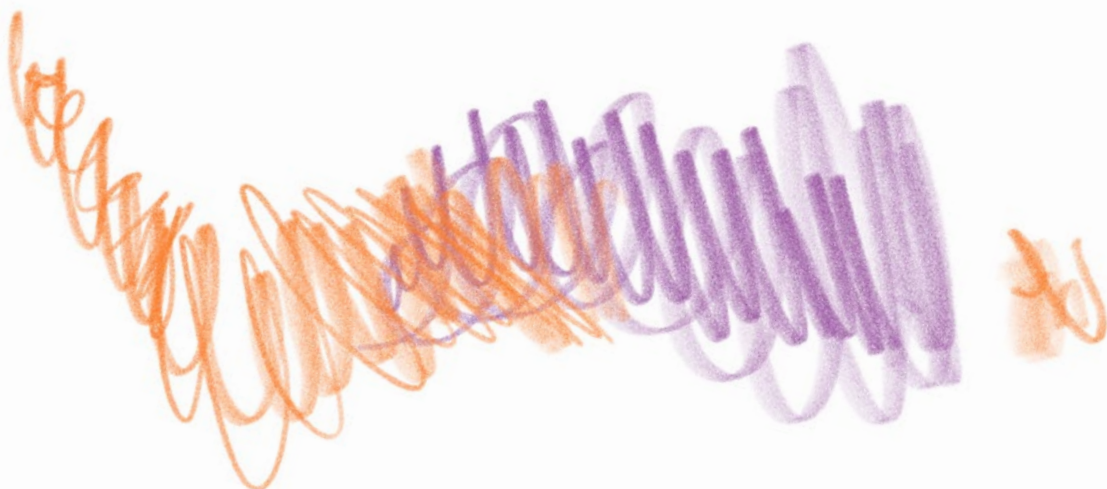
## How can I look after myself?

Supporting a child or young person through trauma can be very emotional and challenging, especially if you are directly impacted by the event as well. It's completely normal to find it hard.

- Try to be kind to yourself; you're doing your best to support and care for the child, and you're not expected to have all the answers.
- Children often take their emotional cues from the adults around them. Letting them see that you're impacted too can help them feel less alone, and asking others for help provides them with a healthy model for coping, showing them that it's okay to reach out when things feel too much.
- Prioritise your basic needs by trying to eat regularly, staying hydrated, and ensuring a healthy sleep routine whenever possible.
- Draw on your family, friends and community so you have someone you trust to talk about how you are feeling and the challenges you are facing.
- Make time for activities you enjoy that help you feel calm.
- If you can, share caregiving responsibilities with others.
- Speak to your GP if things begin to feel unmanageable and you think you would benefit from mental health support. Remember that reaching out for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

**Further resources:**

**WEBPAGE** [Looking after yourself, MindEd for families](#)





# Further reading and resources

## Other UKTC resources

[Critical Incidents in Educational Communities](#)

[Traumatic Bereavement](#)

[Childhood Trauma, War, Migration and Asylum](#)

[Childhood Trauma and PTSD](#)

[Childhood Trauma and the Brain](#)

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