Supporting children and young people exposed to trauma.

A resource for teachers

Children and young people are among our most vulnerable and can be confused and upset when events occur that are not part of their normal routine.

Children and young people often worry and know more than we realise about what is going on around them. Adults may assume that children are doing okay if they don’t talk or ask questions about what has happened. Sometimes children and young people have questions they may not ask unless the adults provide the opportunity.

Most children and young people will experience normal reactions to something that is distressing and with support from trusted adults around them these reactions will subside in a short time.

Routines are important when a traumatic event occurs. School can support all children and young people by listening to their concerns and adhering to the normal school routine as much as possible.

Remember sometimes teachers and parents feel like we don’t have the answers. It is helpful to remind children and ourselves that there are people working hard to make the current situation better.

Exposure to television, print media and social media

- Many children are likely to be unsettled by the images on television, in the print media and online media reports when an event occurs.

- It is important to understand what sense a child or young person makes of what they are seeing on television or hearing via the media (this includes social media) and what they are hearing in adult, peer, or older siblings and friends.

- It is important to monitor the amount of news coverage they see and hear. Seeing the event over and over again can cause vicarious trauma to adults and children.

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• Children and young people may experience sleeplessness and or nightmares about imagined consequences or images from television or print or social media coverage.

Responding to the concerns of children and young people

• Children and young people may need to talk about what they have seen and heard. It is important that we listen to their concerns and acknowledge how they feel and normalize their reaction.

• Keep information factual and dispel any rumours. Ensure you discuss the event with the child in age appropriate language.

• Don’t be afraid to tell them that you don’t have all the answers.

• Children and young people may need reassurance about their safety and the safety of those they care about. This should be a priority for the adults in their lives.

• Teachers and parents should listen to the child or young person’s cues as to what they want to know about the event that has occurred. It is important to be honest with children and young people in an age appropriate way.

• It is not unusual for young children to want to be close to those they love and care about or requesting to see a parent or carer.

• Older children will possibly want to discuss the events, it is advisable to clarify information and dispel rumours as this helps them to process the information more accurately.
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Advice for Parents

• Children may wish to ‘talk’ about the event in different ways – some will use language, some will use play and others may prefer to write or draw

• It is wise for you to monitor your child’s exposure to television coverage, print media and social media

• Some children and young people will want to talk about the event or what has occurred. They will continue to try to make sense of what they have both seen and heard

• Other children will avoid any discussion around the events and will be reassured by routine and normality

• Remember the importance of routine, sleep, exercise and healthy eating. Children need boundaries and limits in place. This helps to restore predictability, safety and security

• Be mindful of the emotional and developmental level of your child. You know them best and if their behavior is out of character

• School staff will always ensure that the safety of children and young people are their first priority. An event may occur at a school that will result in an evacuation or lockdown to keep students safe. This may be upsetting for some students, especially young children. This may see your child reluctant to go to school. If this occurs let the teacher know.

There is a range of things you can do to assist your child or young person including:

• Listen to your child or young person’s retelling of the events
• Allow your child to take the lead – they will guide the discussion, give them time to ask questions, discuss their feelings and emotions
• You can validate their feelings by listening to them
• The fears usually diminish in a short time
• Reassure children that they are safe
• Look for signs of distress (e.g. some children/young people might be scared/withdrawn/nervous/curious)

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• There may be some behavior changes – angry outburst, withdrawal, and hypervigilance, reluctance to leave their parents or carers
• Normalise responses - typical response will range from anger to general upset or sadness, and may include regression in behavior
• Maintain a normal routine - keeping the structure at home or at school in place
• Allow children to express feelings as they arise
• Telling stories about how people manage during difficult times can be helpful
• Separate fact from fiction e.g. children may express fears about unrelated events
• Plan relaxing activities before bed – talk your child through a gentle relaxation, this might include using soothing music and talking them through relaxing tension in their body or simply reading something to them that induces relaxation (i.e. a favorite book)
• Speak in hopeful terms – children and young people will often take their cues from their parents’ reactions; if you are honest, calm, compassionate and open they will be much more able to trust that they will be okay
• Always remember the value of doing something with children that they like to do such as playing, exercising, being outdoors - have a time during your day to share time with your child.

Additional Resources

Kidsmatter
https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters

Kids Helpline
www.kids helpline.com.au

Parentline Victoria