

# Cheshire West & Chester Council Psychology Service

## Responding Positively to Pupils after a Traumatic Event: Information for Parents/Carers



This information aims to help parents/ carers to support children who may have been witness to, or involved in, events that they find very scary or stressful. This may include events such as accidents, violence or terrorist acts.

## How children may react

As children start to understand and “get their heads around” what happened, the following reactions are common:

- Reliving the event, for example, through having nightmares, the event unexpectedly popping into their mind, blaming themselves or often thinking about what could have happened or they could have done differently. Younger children may seem to re-enact what’s happened either through their play or drawings as it helps them understand.
- Not wanting to think or talk about the event, or avoiding anything that might remind them about what happened.
- Getting angry or upset more easily.
- Not being able to concentrate, struggling to remember things or seeming confused more easily.
- Struggling to sleep or losing their appetite.
- Being more jumpy and on the lookout for danger.
- Becoming more clingy with parents/ carers/ family or members of school staff.
- Withdrawing, avoiding or conflicting with others.
- Appearing numb or not seeming to react to things.
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches.
- Temporarily losing abilities (e.g. learning skills, feeding, toileting).



It's important to remember that these are normal responses to an abnormal situation and that children, and their siblings, may respond differently. For example, some children may appear upset quite a while after the event. If you have more than one child, it would not be unusual to find that one child may be affected in a very different way to another child. It is also important to remember that grief and grieving are important processes. Children may begin to worry less if you can help them to see that their reactions are normal and understandable. Most people find that entirely natural human responses to distress are most helpful: care, love, safety, support, engagement and a sense of belonging to a family/ community.

Terrible events can also lead to positive responses as young people use determination, courage, optimism or faith.



The following is a guide to how children may understand death and grief. However, this can be dependent on how mature the child is, their general learning levels, and their own previous experiences.

### **3 -5 years**

Children do not yet accept death as a permanent process

Death is seen as an ending

They fear separation and abandonment more than death

Children may feel angry or sad that someone is not coming home

They may often ask questions such as 'when will grandma come back?'

### **5-7 years**

Children perceive death as something which happens to 'objects' or pets

Death is a vague concept often tied in with sleep; this may come from their understanding of fairy tales where characters go to sleep and then wake up

Most children at this stage don't fully understand that death is permanent but this understanding will start to develop at this age

Children generally have little fear of dying themselves

### **7-9 years**

They understand that death is permanent

Children show some understanding of the emotional response of sadness associated with funerals and mourning ceremonies

They may become fearful that they themselves, or those they love, may die

Children easily identify dead/alive objects

They may be confused about literal/metaphorical phrases around death (e.g. if told that someone has 'gone to sleep' or 'is at rest')

### **9-13 years**

Death is understood as the inevitable end to 'earthly' life

They will better understand abstract/symbolic concepts of death

Young people may ask lots of questions concerning loss and death

They form their own opinions about what happens at death and beyond

### **13+ years**

They form their own opinions about ethical issues of life and death

They begin to understand death as part of a philosophical framework within concepts of time/space and cause/effect

## What can be done to help?



### **Help children and young people to understand what happened:**

Children and young people need a truthful explanation of what happened that makes sense of the main facts, which is appropriate for their age. Even younger children can really benefit from being given a description and explanation of what happened. This may help in many ways:

- It helps the child to make sense of the upsetting event and to reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness.
- It is helpful for children to be prepared so that they can talk to others about what has happened or answer people's questions, if they want to.
- Thinking things through with your child can also help children to realise that although bad things can happen, they don't happen so often that we need to be scared of them all the time.

### **Be available to talk with your child as and when they are ready:**

Sometimes parents and carers try to protect children and young people by avoiding talking about the event. They worry that they will upset them unnecessarily or make things worse. Some people hope that by keeping quiet, children and young people will forget all about the event. In fact, children and people are likely to benefit from talking about what's happened, and they may need adult help to do this.

Talking is usually helpful, but needs to be done carefully and sensitively at the right time for the child or young person. Try and provide opportunities, support and encouragement to help them to talk about it when they are ready to, rather than force them. Some children and young people may want to use dolls or toys, or draw pictures to help them to understand what has happened.

It can be difficult or distressing, but by thinking about, talking about and drawing what happened, you can help children and young people to take more control of the memory and be less afraid of it.

If it's too difficult for you to talk to your child, you could get another adult to help, such as a family member or a trusted teacher. It is helpful if all adults keep to the same story so that the child or young person is not confused.

**Try to make things as normal as possible:** Everyone feels safer when they know what to expect and children may feel unsure of what to expect after a frightening event. You can help your child to feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines and activities as much as possible and ensuring that they are with adults that they know and trust. It helps children and young people to see that, despite these awful events, the world remains largely unchanged and that life goes on. They learn this through seeing you cope with this event and seeing that the routine of life is continuing.



**If someone has died, explain what that means:** Often people take time to accept the reality of a death, particularly if it happened in a traumatic way. Younger children might need help to understand that death is permanent, that it happens to everyone, and that it has a cause.

Some children will seem to understand that the person has died, but then keep asking if the person is coming back. It's important to be patient and take time to explain it in clear language (for example it's clearer to say that "John has died" than to say "John has gone on a journey"). You may need to do this several times. There are also good story books for younger children that address death and provide an age-appropriate way to handle these sensitive but important conversations; Please see <https://www.winstonswish.org/suggested-reading-list/>. Children who are worried will appreciate a lot of reassurance.

**Answer questions truthfully:** Encourage children to ask questions. Try to answer them simply and honestly and give information to younger children a bit at a time. You may find that they need to ask the same question several times, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened. If they ask the questions, they are probably ready to hear the answers. It is also better than keeping questions and worries to themselves. **If children want to know ‘why?’ you could say something like:**

*‘No-one can completely know why. It’s so, so difficult to understand why X would happen. The (e.g. police) will do all they can to make sure this does not happen here. It is really, really unlikely that this will happen to anyone we know. We will keep you safe.’*

**Normalise feelings:** : Listen carefully and allow children to tell their story. Tell them that whatever they are feeling is ok, and to be expected, and you will understand.





### **Give opportunities for children to feel calm and connected to others:**

It is helpful for children to talk to others about what they are feeling, as this normalises their feelings and reactions. Whilst they will often seek comfort at home, finding other support systems that they can connect with to help them feel safe and understood is also important. Also try to create situations where they can forget about things and laugh, and reassure your child that it's ok to do this. Allow your child to choose the time, place and people they wish to talk to. Also let children know that, following a frightening event, some people don't wish to talk about their experiences and may instead find that spending time (sitting, walking, playing a game) with people can allow you to feel close to someone without talking.

**Ensure good communication with school:** If you are concerned, speak to school about a key contact person for your child. Schools are well equipped to support children and can signpost to other organisations who may be able to help.

**Look after yourself as well:** If you are upset by what has happened, it may be more difficult to talk about the frightening event. It is important to let children know that it is natural, and acceptable, to be upset and to cry (even for adults). It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them, e.g. crying together.

Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from the extreme adult grief reaction, and adults who are very affected by grief themselves may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions.

## Some possible activities that you can do with your child

### **A Memory Box** (e.g. use a shoebox).

This can provide the child with a place to put the things that are significant to the person that they have lost. Decorating and filling the box provides opportunities to talk about what they remember. This is also a good idea, as the box can be kept and its contents touched, smelt etc.



**Creating sand pictures in jars** allows the child to select different colours for particular reasons, for example, a child may choose orange because the person they are grieving loved the colour, or may choose blue to symbolise the colour of the sky during the event.

**Putting on a Smile** activity involves making a mask with a smile on one side and a sad/angry face on the other. It is a practical way to demonstrate that it's ok to put on a smile to the outside world when you are actually feeling sad or angry inside. This gives the child the chance to express how it feels when people constantly try to make them feel better.

**Making a Dreamcatcher** is an activity that younger and older children can become engaged in. Children that have been bereaved or have experienced a traumatic event often have trouble sleeping, and this activity provides them with the opportunity to talk through the feelings that keep them awake.



**Memory Stones** involves using a rough and jagged pebble to represent difficult times, a smooth pebble to represent normal times, and a shiny and colourful pebble to represent special times. Each aspect of life can be discussed as the child holds each pebble, and then they are put in a bag together to show how they are all thrown together in life.



**Worry Dolls** can be made with the child or bought ready-made. The legend of the worry dolls says that if you tell them your worries before going to bed, then put them in their box before going to bed, they will take your worries away in the night.

## For further information

While sadness, fear, anger, confusion and physical issues are to be expected, these do normally begin to subside over a few weeks, with a sense of normality gradually returning – even if it is a new kind of ‘normal’. However, some children may continue to experience intense feelings or appear to be deteriorating. A small number of young people may need support from specialist trauma services. However, it’s important to remember that offering counselling too soon after a major disaster is not effective and may make things worse.

If you are worried about your child you should speak to your children’s school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator or school pastoral team who will be able to provide further support to you.

### **The following websites are also helpful:**

**<http://www.mymind.org.uk>:** A local CAMHS website containing useful information for professionals, families and young people

**<http://www.mywell-being.org.uk>:** A online chat resource site for 11-19 year olds living in the Cheshire West and Chester area, allowing young people the opportunity to chat online to a local CAMHS worker

**<https://www.winstonswish.org>:** A National Charity which includes helpful resources for parents/ carers, pages for young people and a freephone helpline (0808 802 0021)

**<https://childbereavementuk.org/>** A National Charity, again containing lots of resources and support for parents/ carers. Freephone helpline is 0800 028 8840.