

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER A DISASTER



As grownups, we all have a role to play in supporting the children in our lives after a 'news-worthy' disaster such as a terrorist attack, wars, or natural or man-made disasters. Children will see things on the news, hear things on the radio, read things on social media. We can't shield them from disasters, and nor should we. No child has ever told us they were glad someone lied to them about a disaster. They have a right to understand and process bad news just as much as adults do.

It's helpful for us to think through how we can best communicate with children and young people so that they are supported and not excluded. Occasionally news stories about disasters feel so awful and so distressing that we ourselves struggle to comprehend them, so how can we support children when we too feel bewildered and are hurting and afraid?

Hopefully, some of the ideas in this information sheet will be helpful, and will support the reader to build a better understanding of how children and young people might react to disasters where there are multiple deaths



Role models

As adults, we are role models for children and young people, and our behaviours will influence their thoughts and feelings. This doesn't mean that we are under pressure to get everything 'right', and indeed there is no single 'right' way to respond to disasters. It does mean however that we need to be mindful of our own feelings.

When disasters are reported, they are often reported quickly and repeatedly, and we can feel overwhelmed by emerging information which gets more and more distressing, such as a rising death toll. Many children and young people will also be hearing the news and talking about it in their social networks. Details of what has taken place can often be unclear and can be misrepresented or exaggerated. Children can end up feeling that they or their loved ones are in imminent danger even when that isn't the case. Plus, how do we 'measure' danger anyway after something like a terrorist attack? It makes us all feel unsafe.

As role models, we can reassure children that everyone hearing about the news is going to feel upset, frightened, bewildered, afraid. Confused and sometimes angry feelings after disasters is natural and a normal human response. We can come from a 'place of safety'; that is, we can acknowledge our own fear and distress but contextualise it with also acknowledging that we don't live in a flood or earthquake zone, bomb attacks are rare etc. This can help them not to feel alone with their feelings, but also not too afraid.

If we hide our true feelings, then in turn that teaches children to hide theirs, and that's unhealthy, so be reassured that it's OK to let children know that you are hurting too.

We need to talk to those around us about our feelings and in turn allow children to do the same. It's frightening to realise that we can't shield children from everything bad. But paying attention to how they are feeling and what they are saying and asking; walking with them rather than away from them, will make everyone feel better.

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Children want to know the truth; How can we be honest and reassuring?

When children aren't given truthful information, they can fill in the blanks themselves, and this can be worse than the reality. Certainly, it can be confusing and frightening. Of course, adults will worry about talking to children about tragic disasters because we will feel that they are too young to be exposed to such awful truths, but not talking is more likely to cause fear and anxiety. Not talking about something gives out a clear message that we can't manage our feelings in relation to what has happened; we can't talk about it because we can't cope.

Being honest means listening more than talking, to find out what's on their mind. You don't have to give them lots and lots of information if they aren't asking for it. Find out what they want to know and how they are feeling first, rather than bombarding them with facts and figures. Children don't necessarily need all the details but they do need their questions and worries listened to and responded to. There are many ways in which we can provide reassurance whilst still being honest. Firstly, we can think about our tone of voice, our body language and the words that we use. We can acknowledge upset in a calm and reassuring manner.

We can gather information about what has happened so that children have access to factual truths rather than misinformation - something that is becoming all too common in the age of social media. In doing this we are seeking to talk rather than protect, and this helps children as they mature to gather perspective and learn to discriminate.

We can be honest and say 'I don't know', especially in response to challenging questions such as - 'Why did that person want to kill people when he/she didn't even know them?'

We can be mindful of the random nature of these events, and try to keep our responses located in logical reality, which is that it is unlikely to happen to us. Terrorist attacks and other disasters are rare and we need to remember that even when we are distressed by the news of such an event. It may be helpful to explain that the stories are in the news not only because they are shocking and distressing, but also because they are rare.

We can focus on the good things that are being done in the face of the disaster; the work of the emergency services to help people, the work of the disaster relief charities to provide aid and shelter, the work of individuals who provide comfort and support to those affected.

We can try to minimise the exposure to the news, which can feel relentless and distressing even to adults. Repeatedly watching and re-watching news footage, which gets out very quickly now and can be quite graphic, can have damaging psychological consequences.

We can try and make things as normal as possible. Even in the face of awful disasters, life does go on. Children can be helped to feel safe again by sticking to normal routines and activities. If they have a sense that they have control over some things in their life, it can help with feelings of confusion and feeling out of control.



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What kind of responses are we likely to see in our children?

Children will react in a range of ways and there is no 'set pattern' response to news about a disaster.

As they try to make sense of what has happened, children might show some of the following responses:

- Nightmares
- Inability to sleep
- Withdrawal
- Being jumpy, anxious, on edge
- Angry
- Tearful
- Physical symptoms – tummy aches, headaches
- Worries about going to school
- Attachment – not wanting to leave their parent(s)/carer(s) for fear of losing them
- Not wanting to talk about the event or wanting to talk about it all the time

Over time we might see our children 'puddle jumping' – they may ask us questions out of the blue about something that happened weeks or months ago. Be reassured that this doesn't mean that they have been worrying about it all that time.

What if they don't want to talk?

Some children may shut down and not want to talk. That's fine. You can reassure them that if they have questions or do want to talk at any time, then you are ready to talk and listen. The majority of children are resilient and can learn life lessons about their own strength and the kindness of others in the face of disasters.

Looking after yourself

Adults are also affected by news of disasters and multiple deaths. It touches us deeply and causes us to question some fundamental things in a way that is uncomfortable. If you are upset by what has happened, talk to a trusted friend, a colleague, your GP. Talking about it can help and in turn will mean that you are better able to support your children.

We are here to help

If you would like to discuss anything in this information sheet or if you are concerned about your children's feelings and responses after a disaster then please do contact us. We'd love to talk to you.

