

How can we help and support children and young people when something terrible happens?

A Guide for Schools, Parents & Carers

Reactions to an upsetting event

Children and adults respond to distressing and upsetting events in different ways, depending on how closely they are connected to the event, their resilience and pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g. a recent bereavement/ trauma) social support and the degree of disruption to their lives. For children and young people, age and level of development are also important factors.

Those who are affected may have thoughts and feelings unlike any other that may have experienced before.

This is a **NORMAL** reaction and these emotions may last for some time.

This leaflet will help you to know how others have reacted in similar situations and help you to understand what effects this experience can have on thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

The feelings and emotions that children may experience can include:

- Confusion/ helplessness
- Fear and sadness
- Anger, guilt and shame
- Changes in behaviour e.g. anger or aggression or withdrawn
- Sleep disturbance, including bad dreams
- Clinginess, including a desire to sleep with parents or fear of separation.
- Hypervigilance e.g. to loud noises
- Difficulty concentrating, especially at school
- Changes in appetite
- Fears for own safety of the safety of family and friends
- Reluctance to talk– either because it is too painful or out of fear of upsetting family or friends.
- Easily upset by everyday events
- Unwillingness to go to school or college

- Try to answer questions as honestly and accurately as you can.
- Maintain familiar routines and structures– these provide a sense of security.
- Be patient and calm, especially with changes in behaviour.
- Give opportunities to talk about feelings and let them know it is ok to be upset. Do not hide your own feelings. It is ok for others, especially children, to see an adult upset. Explain in simple terms that everyone gets upset by such events.
- Try to treat the child in your usual way. You may wish to be especially protective—this is a natural reaction but in the longer term being over-protective can make a child feel insecure.
- Be ready to listen but do not worry if the child chooses not to talk. They may express their feelings in other ways e.g. play or in their behaviour.
- Encourage self-care e.g. getting enough sleep, eating healthily, taking exercise and taking time to be with family and friends and/or interests and hobbies.
- Make time for yourself and make sure you have other adults you can talk to.
- Feelings of distress will be short lived for some children, as they and the people around them gradually adjust to what has happened. For others the reactions may be more severe and long lasting.

If after a period of time you are worried about how your child is adjusting, then it may be appropriate to seek further help and support. See Stockport's Local Offer <https://stockport.fsd.org.uk/kb5/stockport/fsd/advice.page?id=Hv1oPLqvrzE>