Supporting children and young people following a sad or distressing event

Information for parents and carers

When something sad, frightening or unexpected happens, it can be difficult to know what to say or how best to support your child. You do not need to have all the answers. Being available, listening and providing familiar care and routines can help.

Children and young people respond in different ways. Some may show sadness, worry or anger straight away, while others may show little outward reaction. Feelings and questions may emerge later or come and go. There is no single way a child should respond.

Changes you may notice

Your child may:

- Want to stay closer to you or other trusted adults.
- Seem more tearful, anxious, irritable or withdrawn.
- Find it harder to settle at bedtime, have disturbed sleep or experience nightmares.
- Need more help with everyday tasks or temporarily return to earlier behaviours, such as bedwetting.
- Find it harder to concentrate, remember things or complete schoolwork.
- Experience headaches, stomach aches or feel sick.
- Ask the same questions repeatedly or explore what has happened through play, drawing or stories.
- Want to talk about what happened, or prefer not to talk.

Your child may also play, laugh and enjoy their usual activities. This does not mean that they do not care or have forgotten what happened.

These changes can be understandable responses to distress, but they should not automatically be assumed to relate to the event. Take new or concerning changes seriously and seek advice if you are worried. **You do not need to wait for difficulties to persist before asking for help.**

Ways you can help

Be available without putting pressure on them

Let your child know that you are there to listen whenever they want. They may find it easier to talk while walking, playing or doing something alongside you. Allow them to choose whether and how they express themselves.

Give clear, honest information

Use simple language suited to your child's age, understanding and communication needs. Start with what they already know and answer their questions without adding unnecessary or upsetting detail. It is okay to say, "I don't know," or "We don't have that information yet."

Acknowledge feelings and offer reassurance

Listen without rushing to explain away or change their feelings. You might say, "It makes sense that you feel worried," or "I'm here with you." Explain what adults are doing to help keep them safe, without making promises you cannot guarantee.

Keep familiar routines, with some flexibility

Regular meals, bedtime routines, school attendance and familiar activities can provide continuity. Your child may need extra support or adjustments on more difficult days. Maintain clear, gentle boundaries while allowing for their changing needs.

Offer comfort in ways that suit your child

Some children welcome a cuddle; others prefer quiet company, space or a familiar activity. Follow your child's preferences, including their sensory and communication needs.

Respond patiently to repeated questions

Children may need to hear the same information several times as they make sense of what has happened. Try to respond calmly and consistently.

Be mindful of news, rumours and social media

Check what your child has heard or seen. Gently correct inaccurate information and help them take breaks from distressing images, repeated coverage or online discussions.

Stay connected with school or your child's setting

Share relevant changes you have noticed and discuss what may help. Let staff know about particular worries, important family beliefs or upcoming reminders, such as anniversaries.

Look after yourself too

You may also be affected by what has happened. Make space for your own support and practical needs. You do not have to manage everything alone.

Does my child need counselling?

Not every child needs counselling following a distressing event. Familiar relationships, practical care and opportunities to talk when they choose are important sources of support.

Some children will need additional or specialist help. Seeking advice does not mean that something is wrong with your child, and you do not need to wait if you are worried.

When to seek further help

You can ask for advice whenever you are concerned. Speak with your child's school or setting, GP or another appropriate professional if you notice worrying changes, particularly if difficulties are worsening or affecting everyday life.

If your child talks about self-harm or suicide, or you are concerned they may harm themselves, seek help promptly. For urgent mental health support in England, call **NHS 111 and select the mental health option (option 2)**, or ask for an urgent GP appointment. Parents and carers can call on behalf of a child.

Call 999 or go to A&E immediately if your child's life is at risk, they have seriously injured themselves or taken an overdose, or you cannot keep them safe

The most important message is: your child does not have to face this alone, and neither do you.