

This leaflet is for parents and carers whose children have been involved in a sudden, unexpected and distressing event. It includes examples of possible reactions that your pre-school child might experience, ways your child might be helped and a list of useful contact

Normal reactions to a traumatic event

Following any distressing event it is quite normal to experience a range of reactions and each person, including young children, will respond in their own way. The variety in response could be due to a number of factors including their developing language skills and their level of emotional and social understanding. As adults, it is important to understand that certain behaviours, bodily expressions or play can be mediums through which they communicate alongside, or instead of, language. Your pre-school child may show **some** of the following:-

- Have limited understanding of what happened to them. Whilst this can mean they are more likely to forget the event after a short while, it can also mean they are more likely to misinterpret what has happened
- Display magical thinking (ie that something is not real, is reversible) and have a need for concrete information
- They may display symptoms such as night terrors, have difficulty sleeping, become clingy or display regressive behaviours (ie behaviours akin to that of a child of a younger age)
- Signs that they are 're-experiencing' or thinking about the traumatic event through their play. You may notice that your child draws images related to the event or acts out scenes of the event when playing
- Strong expressions of emotions by adults may frighten them and they may display fears that are unrelated to the trauma
- They may be anxious when separated from primary care-givers and want to stay close to them. This is their way of seeking comfort and reassurance
- Their expression of emotion may be more extreme following a traumatic event with them, for example, appearing unusually withdrawn or quiet and/or they may become more aggressive in their play

How to help your child

A basic premise for children in this age group is that their lives are centred on their home and family and their "very sense of well-being depends on the presence of the parent/carer" (Christ, 2000).

It is also important to recognise that the reactions you are seeing immediately following a trauma are 'normal' ways of reacting to extreme events. For most children these will fade over time however seek further professional support if the child's severe symptoms persist over longer periods of time (over 3 months).

Recommendations for this age group include:

- Ensure basic needs are met (ie. sleep and food)
- Suggest emotions that the child might be feeling
- Continue with positive activities
- Try to re-establish routines as soon as possible and stick to them. In particular, meal and sleep routines
- Be patient with your child's behaviours and provide them with time to talk
- Answer their questions (as far as you can) using brief simple answers, comprising of concrete language (ie avoid abstracts or euphemisms)
- Reassure your child, young children often think they are central to their world and may think something they have done has influenced the situation – talk to them, make sure they know this is not the case

If a death has occurred:

- Set time aside to talk to them about the person who died. Use concrete details to describe what 'dead' means – children younger than five generally do not understand that death is final and think death is reversible.
- Help them to remember the person who died. Give the child access to the possessions of the deceased to enable more talk and provide a sense of connection.
- Don't avoid mentioning the person who has died and, if your child wants to, let them talk about happy memories.
- If you have been affected by a bereavement ensure you are being supported as if you look after yourself you will be more able to support your child.

The following may also be helpful:



www.cruse.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 808 1677



www.winstonswish.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 802 0021



www.samaritans.org.uk

Helpline: 116 123