

# Children's reactions to critical and traumatic events

## Information for parents and teachers

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### What is a trauma or critical event?

A **trauma** refers to a situation where a child or adult is faced with an experience that threaten the life or physical integrity of either the child directly or one of its loved ones. Such situations cause distress, horror or fear, and can lead to various reactions in the time following the event. There are less serious situations, i.e. serious illness, that will not qualify to be called a trauma, but such **critical situations** or critical events can also cause upheaval among children and adolescents. In some cases it can lead to what is called **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** involving serious problems with intrusive memories from the event, struggles to avoid thoughts, places and conversations that remind the child about the event, and a hyperactive nervous system.

Examples of events that may cause traumatic stress are:

- Witnessing death or serious injury of another person
- Being in a life-threatening situation
- Acts of war and violence, i.e. witnessing one's house being bombed or burning, witnessing acts of violence
- Sudden, unexpected death of a family member, good friend or classmate
- Being exposed personally (or having a loved one survive) technical or natural disasters

### Normal reactions

Children's reactions differ greatly. There is not one way that children react universally. Depending on their age, their personality, the culture they live in, their social surroundings, what they have experienced or been exposed to, and the help they receive from their family, friends, teachers and others, they can react in as many ways as there are people. However, there is certain regularity to their reactions, and some reactions are more common than others. Among some of the most common reactions are:

- Anxiety and fear
- Sadness, longing and loss
- Distressing intrusive images (pictures) or thoughts about the event
- Sleep difficulties and nightmares
- Bad mood, irritability, anger, attention demanding behaviour and other behaviour changes
- Guilt and self-condemnation
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Concentration difficulty coupled with over-activity or inactivity
- More childish behaviour or returning to an earlier stage of development
- Traumatic play and repetition of what they experienced
- Performance decline (school, sports)
- Psychosomatic complaints (stomach aches, headaches, bedwetting, nausea etc)

## ***Immediate reactions***

When children hear that someone has died or experienced another critical event, reactions can vary from no reactions at all to strong emotional outbursts. If it is a death and the children has reached school age they know that death is final, they may not react at once as they are pushing thoughts about what has happened to one side, so that they can take them in a little at the time. Immediate reactions vary from protest to crying, anger or apathy. Adults are wise if they refrain from pressing the child to react in a particularly way and instead accepting confirm the child's reaction.

## ***Common reactions following the event***

### **Anxiety and fear**

Following critical events children may show fear and want to be close to their loved ones and have a greater need of physical closeness than usual. They may be afraid that something new will happen, either to their friends or their family and have expectations about the worst. Their sense of security has been affected and it is hard for them to think that things cannot happen to them as they realize that he or she herself can die and become afraid of illness or accidents. Children need information, reassurances, and understanding of their reactions and needs, and the sense of security that life will continue more or less as before.

### **Sadness longing and loss**

If a child has lost a loved one it is important to remember that they have a shorter span of sadness than adults and usually will not be sad for long periods of time. This does not mean that they do not continue to think about the person who has passed away for as long time, or that they do not miss or long for him or her. Both regarding sadness and other emotions their short reaction span may lead adults to believe that children do not react as much and as deeply as they in fact do.

The children build bridges over their sense of loss by seeking out places where they have been together with the dead person, or they seek out situations and things they associate with the dead person. But children may also protect themselves by denying what has happened, either in their imagination or through their actions. In adolescence it is not uncommon to have experiences of the dead person being present, something that can be frightful if not informed about. Children's grief usually takes longer time than adults think, and it is important that teachers and parents understand the longevity of these reactions.

### **Distressing, intrusive images or thoughts about the event**

Sometimes children have witnessed a critical event and are left with strong sensory impressions from this event. Although they were not present they can also fantasise what happened and have these fantasies come back as repetitive intrusions. These intrusions are like seeing pictures or a film of the event, or it may be an auditory intrusion where they hear repeatedly what they heard during the critical incident. Unfortunately children do not spontaneously tell adults that they have these intrusions, and it is important for

adults to ask to be able to help them with reducing this problem. Afterwards different stimuli may trigger such intrusive material, f. example the smell of a fire if they experienced a fire, a shake in a building following an earthquake, or the sound of an ambulance if they have been in an accident.

### **Sleep difficulties and nightmares**

Because of the intrusive thoughts and images, children may find it difficult to fall asleep or might wake up having nightmares. Their need to have the light on and the door open and make sure that the parents are nearby is a normal reaction that lowers their anxiety.

### **Anger and attention demanding behaviour**

After a critical incident some children feel very angry at what happened and the injustice they may feel. Their anger is usually directed towards those who surround them and sometimes the anger is used to demand the attention of adults to get comfort or keep adults from being too preoccupied by what has happened.

### **Withdrawal and isolation**

Some children withdraw from others in the aftermath of a critical event and spend more time alone. This may reflect that they do not find the same pleasure in social or sport activities as they did before. It might be a sign that children need more help.

### **Guilt and self-condemnation**

Children can easily think that things that happen are a result of their own thoughts or actions. In adolescence they can be very self-critical and may unduly think of themselves as responsible for things that happen. Sometimes feelings of guilt represent real guilt, f. example in a car or bus accident that results from a child disturbing the driver or during play where an older sibling was involved and a younger sibling accidentally hurt him- or herself.

### ***Long-term reactions***

Most of the reactions that have been described are observed during the first weeks and month following the critical event. However, following a death the sense of loss, longing and sadness can last over much longer time. If the event or loss happens suddenly, unexpectedly or in a particularly traumatic way, the event can potentially influence different aspects of the child's development. It is known that a dramatic event of this nature can alter a child's character and the shaping of his personality, his readiness to meet the future, his ability to regulate strong feelings, his choice of career, and his relationship with others (fear of losing those who are dear to them). As long as the child has caring adults and good care, there is little reason to expect that he will grow up with a greater risk of developing long-term psychological problems. Among the risk factors that increase the likelihood of the child having problems, are:

- The child witnessed what happened
- The parents develop or already struggle with major problems
- The child experienced that he or she was in great danger

- The child perceived strong reactions in their parents without being explained why
- The home circumstances are very negative for the child
- There is a high degree of denial of the events in the home or at school, and a complete absence of open and direct talk about what has happened.

If a child still continues to react strongly beyond 4 – 5 weeks in a way that indicates that he is troubled by memories and thoughts (f. example nightmares, sleep disturbances, restlessness and excessive activity), withdraws from others, avoids anything that may remind of what has happened, or show reactions which indicate a constant sense of danger (he is always on guard, is excitable, irritable, etc.), then professional help should be sought. If several risk factors are present and the child's behaviour changes remarkable or strong feelings continue with the same intensity, a mental health professional should be contacted for advice on how the child can be further supported.

### **What can be done to help children?**

Some important guidelines for immediate help for children will be:

- Provide an immediate sense of being taken care of
- Secure a framework of physical closeness if the child allows it
- Be careful to trace misunderstandings, and misconceptions and place importance on giving the child information and facts about what has happened that contribute to a concrete understanding of the situation
- Listen to the child's understanding of what you have said and encourage him to express his thoughts and questions, and accept his reaction or lack of reaction.
- Set the scene so that the child can express what has happened in different ways through talking, playing, writing etc.
- Emphasize openness and honesty in the home and at school
- Return quickly to normal routines at home and in the school
- If an important event has happened at home, inform the school staff at an early stage so that they can give the child the best possible support

It can be useful for children to go through what happened, to help them towards making their understanding as complete as possible and as a support for their memories at a later stage. This will also clarify and counteract misunderstandings and prevent fantasies. If the child has experienced a death let it participate in rituals. However, make sure that the child is prepared for what takes place, f. example in viewing a dead body and explain to the child what will happen. Provide parental support through the procedures and explain what will happen afterwards.

If the event has affected you as a parent do not be afraid to let your child know, but remember that a composed demeanour will provide a greater sense of security for your child. Help your child to label his or her feelings and communicate that feelings are normal and OK. It is a good investment to spend more time with your child in the period following a critical event, as this will have a calming and reassuring effect on your child. However, with adolescents you may have to adjust to their increased need for autonomy.

In adolescence children often seek out their friends more than adults for support and you may have to be careful not to interfere with their development of autonomy.

### *Summary of advice to parents*

- Make it clear to children that they are free to react. If children are uncertain how their reactions may be met by adults, they may hold them back.
- Help children to recognize their reactions and understand what has happened. This does not mean that you should not respect the need the children may have to take in the event or loss little by little, but do not enter into a joint denial of what has happened.
- Say that you will be there in the future if the child wants to talk about various aspects of the event.
- Listen for underlying feelings and deeper meanings in their comments, questions and behaviour.
- Children seek actively for a framework and an understanding that they can use to grasp what has happened. They must reshape assumptions about the world, other people and themselves, and may have many deep thoughts about different aspects of existence.
- Strong and often unfamiliar reactions that children experience can be frightening because they do not have earlier experiences as a basis of comparison to help them to understand thoughts and reactions. When they are not able to formulate them, it can be important for adults to help put into words the usual thoughts and feelings in situations like this so that the children understand what is going on within them.
- Traumatic events can make it difficult to regulate the strength of reactions, which may mean that children either try to avoid the strong feelings or they feel completely overwhelmed by them. It is of good help if parents help children to put words to these feelings or express them in some other way, and to regulate the strength of these reactions.

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