

## Age Appropriate Support Guideposts Following a Traumatic Event

### Under 5s

- Reassure, protect and help them name and talk about their feelings.
- Drawing and child-led play can be helpful means of connection, communication and support.
- Focus on the helpers and heroes that support people in need.
- Find ways to highlight what the child is good at, e.g. 'wow, you have coloured that so carefully' or 'you are so kind and thoughtful' - help them find their superpower.

### 5-12 year olds

- Providing just enough information to complete a story around a difficult event, without overloading the child with too much upsetting information, can help reduce anxiety related to uncertainty or imagined aspects of events.
- Drawing and writing short stories can be a helpful way to identify and name emotions in response to difficulties.
- Contain - reassure them they are safe and tell them what is being done to keep them and others safe.
- Frame - Use the child's knowledge of existing stories of strength and heroes so they can emotionally *borrow* from the strength of others when needed.
- Normalise - terrorism isn't new! As Nicky Cox, editor of the fabulous First News, has recommended, discussing terrorism in ways children have heard about before, such as the story of Guy Fawkes, can offer a helpful perspective even for younger children.
- Tune in to their needs and hold space with kindness and gentle open questions. *Holding space* through difficult times essentially means compassionately joining someone on a journey that we may not be able to see or fully understand. It means keeping someone company through silences and offering company and warmth - not trying to fix things, make it better, offer advice or sugar coat experiences. Children are not helpless and not always dependent on adults - acknowledging children have agency, solutions, and often know what support they need is important.
- Help them find their inner hero - What are they good at? What can they do to help others?

### Tweens and teens

- Find out what they know and try to fill in the gaps with just enough of the information they need - you can always say more as time goes on if needed. However, it is much harder to take information back.
- Depending upon their connection to the trauma, they may want to write letters, which they may or may not want to actually give to anyone. Writing letters and stories can be helpful ways to process and make sense of what has happened.
- Acknowledging and being thankful for what they have.

- Spending time with loved ones. Teens may be more likely than younger children to withdraw and they may need some time alone. However, you know your child better than anyone, regular check-ins, texts and even mini-notes can be a helpful way to keep communication channels open.
- Older teens may wish to get more involved by raising money for related causes, taking food supplies to hospitals or even giving blood (if age 17 or older). Helping in meaningful ways can support the development of resilience for young people, help them feel more connected to their community and help them identify with the heroes they see in action.
- Older children may find comfort in engaging more critically with social and political debates, rather than settling for simplistic interpretations. Engaging in this way can help in terms of finding new perspectives and gaining a greater sense of knowledge, agency and control in difficult circumstances.

### **Remember, difficult questions don't always need definitive answers**

- In instances where a city is attacked by an extremist group, there is often a lot of information not shared with us, the public. It is important we acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge with young people, while also reassuring them that safety measures are in place.
- Young people are likely to hear all sorts of unhelpful things through misinformed sources, especially relating to particular faiths and religions. While parents may not have a detailed knowledge of a range of faiths, statements are usually issued by religious leaders after distressing events, statements that often focus on comradery, humanity and compassion. These can be shared with young people to offer a balanced perspective and wider sense of community, encouraging older children to think more critically about some things they may hear.
- *Who would do that Mummy?* Name and tame! IS/Daesh - try to reduce some of the anxious uncertainty by giving those responsible a name and explaining that they are a small group of people who make certain choices, although actual attacks are very rare. This not only gives the perpetrators an identity for the child, which helps contain the idea of faceless 'baddies', but also helps to disqualify some of the unhelpful stories they may hear from others.
- Don't make promises you can't keep. None of us know what is around the corner or what we may all face in the future, especially in the current climate. **What we can promise our children is that we will be there with them, supporting them and caring for them. There is always comfort in togetherness and belonging.**

**Every child is different and will respond to trauma in different ways. However, if after three months or so you notice that your child is still struggling most of the time in ways that are unusual for your child, it may be time to look for professional help. For further information and guidance, the following resources could be helpful:**

American Psychological Association. How to talk to children about difficult news. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx>

Anxiety UK's Children and Young People with Anxiety A Guide for Parents and Carers [http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/media/19579/cyp\\_parents\\_1\\_2\\_web.pdf](http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/media/19579/cyp_parents_1_2_web.pdf)

Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Talking with Children about War and Violence in the World <https://www.teachervision.com/historic-wars-and-military-action/talking-children-about-war-violence-world?page=3>

Helping Traumatized Children. A Brief Overview for Caregivers. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. [https://childtrauma.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Helping\\_Traumatized\\_Children\\_Caregivers\\_Perry1.pdf](https://childtrauma.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Helping_Traumatized_Children_Caregivers_Perry1.pdf)

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