

Tip Sheet for Parents and Caregivers Supporting Children and Youth After Traumatic Events

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of war or high-profile violence, both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy, or for whom have had other similar trauma in their lives, may have feelings of grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger.

In the days, and sometimes weeks, following a tragic event, these varied reactions are not uncommon. Typically, these reactions subside over time as children and youth are reassured that they are safe and protected, gain a factual understanding of the event, and are provided opportunities to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and fears. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Take care of your own feelings and needs

- Adults have fears and worries too. It's important that our feelings do not interfere with listening to children and youth, who must feel that adults are listening, are calm and are in control.
- Take time to deal with your own reactions before speaking to a child or youth. If you are coping well, then you can better offer children and youth your support. Reflect on your personal feelings and fears and consider any challenges that could arise while talking with children and youth.
- If you are struggling, ask for help. Have someone else support children and youth while you care for yourself.
- Keep regular schedules and routines.
- Remember the importance of self-care such as eating, being hydrated, sleeping, physical activity, exercise and connecting with others.
- School Boards can offer specialized support such as Social Workers and help to make referrals to community supports. Ask your school Principal if you wish to speak with someone.

Acknowledge and Normalize Feelings

- Individuals will have a variety of emotional responses to events. Feelings after traumatic events may include fear, loss of control, anger, loss of stability, isolation and confusion.
- Accept these feelings and validate them, emphasizing that people are entitled to their feelings and opinions unless it hurts someone else.
- Respect diverse responses. Some teens may prefer to talk with their friends instead of adults. Some children and youth may not want to talk much at all.

- Let them know that their feelings are normal, expected and shared by many others.
- Recognize the feelings that are behind actions and put them into words. For example, “I can see that you are feeling worried about this”.
- Encourage children and youth to talk with you or another caring adult. Emphasize that you are there to help and want them to tell an adult if they feel, or a friend feels, overwhelmed.
- If children and youth are using humour inappropriately in relation to the situation, help them understand why this is hurtful to others and how it is insensitive or inappropriate.

Help Children and Youth Feel Safe

- Be calm, offer reassurance and explain how children and youth are in a safe place. Review things that make us safe and help to protect us, including things that help us feel more secure. Help children and youth identify people they have in their lives for support.
- Encourage children and youth to draw on their own self-care skills and other sources of strength they can draw on.
- Limit media consumption, especially for elementary aged youth. Limiting media exposure helps to prevent children and youth becoming too focused on the crisis events as exposure can increase anxiety and fear.
- Discuss conflict resolution and peaceful ways of resolving conflicts.
- Keep explanations of events age-appropriate
- Talk about the roles of people in our communities, society and country to help to respond to crisis events and have responsibilities for fighting for justice.
- Acknowledge that sometimes in conflict situations people take sides: use this opportunity to teach about the dangers and negative impact of prejudice, discrimination and racism

Be a Good Listener and Observer

- When children or youth ask questions, listen carefully and respond as appropriately and objectively as possible.
- Let them guide you regarding their level of concern or desire for information.
- When answering questions, stick to the facts. Speculating what could happen raises anxiety in people. It’s OK to say that you don’t have all of the answers.

Be Alert to Changes in Behaviour

Children and youth may respond differently to traumatic events. Watching for changes in children and youth’s behavior is a way that we can keep track of how events may be impacting them and understand these behaviours as communicating distress. For example, you may see any of the following:

- Preoccupation with violence (e.g.: pretending to blow things up)
- Difficulty concentrating

- Aggressive behavior
- Physical complaints (e.g.: stomach aches and headaches)
- Increase in or loss of appetite
- Anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Mood changes
- Sleep disturbances

Identify Children and Youth Who May Be at Risk and Seek Help

Most children and youth will be able to cope with their concerns about current events, with help from parents, teachers, and other caring adults. Some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions due to personal circumstances.

The most vulnerable children are those who:

- Can directly relate to the traumatic event.
- Have friends or relatives in the affected areas.
- Have experienced a recent death in the family.
- Have a history of depression, anxiety disorders, or other trauma.
- Have recently come from a country where they experienced armed conflict.

Keep Communication Open Between Home and School

- Be sure to reach out from home to school, and from school to come so that all adults know if a child is experiencing stress at school. Schools have resources that can help.

Community Support Resources

- **Contact Brant – Single Point Access for Children's Services:** (519) 758-8228
- **Haldimand Norfolk REACH:** (519) 587-2441, ext. 350
- **St. Leonard's Crisis Response:** (519) 759-7188 or 1-866-811-7188
- **Haldimand-Norfolk REACH Crisis:** 1-866-327-3224
- **Haldimand-Norfolk C.A.S.T (16 years and older):** 1-866-487-2278
- **Six Nations Crisis:** 1-866-445-2204 or 519-445-2207
- **Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-688-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868