

Talking with children about a major emergency

Talking to children about shocking and distressing events that are the focus of news and the media can be difficult, but showing an understanding, observing what is happening and showing compassion during these events is important.

How do I talk to children about recent events in the news?

Firstly, check how you are feeling. It is best to explore an upsetting subject when you feel you have the capacity.

What language should I use?

When discussing distressing events with children, respond to questions with simple explanations, avoiding graphic images that can stick in their minds. You could say, for example, that there was an explosion and that some people died. Other people were hurt, and they are now being looked after in hospital. You could add that people are very sad, and that they are being supported by their family and friends.

How can I reassure children when they find out?

You can give children thoughtful reassurance if you think that might be helpful. For instance, you could help children appreciate how events like these are extremely rare, and when they happen there are people around to help. It can be helpful to explain to children how to keep themselves safe and what you are doing to provide them with a safety net yourself.

Give space for them to express themselves and listen to what they say and how they are feeling.

What's a normal response to traumatic news?

- Changes in children's behaviour
- Rapidly changing emotions
- Tiredness from nightmares or poor sleep
- Disturbed eating habits or being afraid to go outside
- Behavioural outbursts or becoming quiet and withdrawn.

It is normal for children to respond in any number of ways. If a child doesn't show any signs, they may still be affected and need extra support.

Does every child need extra support?

Children are remarkably resilient, and most will recover on their own. For a few, changes in behaviour might persist. Engage in "watchful waiting", and if you notice the behaviour continuing for a month or more, the child may need extra support. If you are concerned, you can contact your GP.

How to help

Explore with the child or group, how they might help someone who is feeling sad and upset.

They could imagine a child younger than them who has heard the news and is upset by it. How might they help them? For younger children, this activity can be done with a toy or a puppet: For example, "Bear is upset. How can we make bear feel better?"

Some possible ideas include:

- Ask the child or toy to say how they are feeling.

- Ask if there's anything you can do to help them.
- Ask if they'd like to do something you know they enjoy.
- Ask if they'd like their favourite toy or something they find comforting.

For groups:

Use the children's suggestions to create a role-play. In the scene, one or more children can pretend to be upset, and others in the group respond with helpful suggestions and questions. If using a puppet, it can respond positively to the children's suggestions, encouraging them to give more.

For individuals:

Use a puppet or a toy and get the child to ask them the questions. You can then respond with simple answers.

It could also be useful to ask the questions to your child or the group and have them ask you the same questions. It can be reassuring for them to see that you are also acknowledging the events taking place.

At the end of the activity, ask the child or group what they would do if the child or toy was still upset. Which adults could they tell? Where could they go to for support?

Ways to adapt

Some children may find it hard to express themselves verbally as they may not know what to say.

To support this activity you could:

- Use musical instruments or sounds in the role-play instead of verbal dialogue. What would the upsetting news sound like? What instrument might represent someone who is upset and another person who wants to help them feel better?
- Draw how they are feeling using different emojis as answers when asked a question. Give them a list of emojis they could use so they can copy them down.
- Have a selection of faces or emojis showing different emotions and ask the child or group to point to the emotion they feel when asked the question.
- Use colours to show emotions. Give them a selection of colours and tell them which emotions they represent. Ask them to draw an image using the colours that match their emotions.

Coping strategies

Show some activities that people do to feel calmer if they are upset or scared about something. Use a whiteboard or other means to present the suggestions one by one. Children should think about each suggestion for a moment or two and then decide on their response.

Responses could include:

- Yes, I'll try that.
- Mmm, that's not for me.
- I'm not sure.

Agree a way for them to indicate their response, for example by raising their hands or using sticky notes. Then show the activities:

- Listen to music.
- Read a book.
- Watch television.
- Be with other people.
- Have some quiet time.
- Play a musical instrument.
- Play a computer game.
- Play outside.
- Be with my pet.
- Play sport.
- Talk to someone.
- Think about happy experiences.
- Dance.
- Write.
- Draw or paint.

What else might work? Invite additions to the list.

Keep the list available for them to see so that they are able to revisit and remind themselves of coping strategies they can use.

Helpful notes

Ask children to complete the following sentences:

- When I feel anxious or frightened, it helps me to ...
- When I feel sad, I like to ...

Children can either write, draw or verbally answer with their responses.

This can be done individually or discussed in groups.

For group

Encourage discussion in pairs or small groups. Collect answers in if written, and then randomly distribute back out again so each child has a suggestion that they did not write.

If they give verbal responses, write them down for all to see.

Ask them to complete the sentence:

- I could help by ...

Share the results at the end of the activity, for example by attaching the notes to a wall or the board. Discuss them as a group, pointing out the range of preferences and the different ways of helping.

For individuals:

Discuss how these coping strategies help them to deal with their emotions. Let them know what you like to do and what helps you to manage your emotions too.

Discuss what you could do to help each other and how to recognise when you are both feeling upset or frightened and make a note to be displayed somewhere for both to view.

If any of the children you are discussing these events with have been involved in the major emergency and you think they are experiencing trauma, your local GP can refer you onto specialist services, such as CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

Available resources:

Kindness Activity Pack – <https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-involved/teaching-resources/kindness-activity-pack>

How can you overcome worries in a first aid situation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2aAEwbSC38>