

Helping children after a major event

Major events are happening around the globe with greater frequency and these often have a significant human impact. Major events can have a significant impact on children, and they will respond in many different ways. Young children especially may find it extremely difficult to understand what has happened. Children will likely to experience very strong emotions but can find it difficult to explain what they are feeling.

Most children will recover and grow from traumatic experiences with support from their parents, family, friends and teachers. You may need help from people along the way, so don't be afraid to talk to your child's teacher about their experience and behaviour and listen to others if they are close to your child and have observed their behaviour.

How do children respond to major events?

Children, like adults, respond to major events in many different ways. They can feel distressed, frightened and overwhelmed, even if they haven't been directly impacted. Children may need to deal with feelings and situations including:

- ◆ **Feeling insecure or unsafe** – and that everything has changed
- ◆ **Feelings of loss** – they may have lost people or possessions which will be hard to comprehend
- ◆ **Changed circumstances** – they may need to move to a new house or change school, or take on new responsibilities in their family
- ◆ **Emotions they might not have experienced before** – including fear, sadness and anxiety

Providing support following a major event

Children are influenced by their parents' and other adults' reactions to the event so it's important to take care of yourself first, in order to take care of your children.

- ◆ Ensure you get enough sleep and rest, so you have the energy to be a positive role model
- ◆ Accept help from others if they offer it and seek help if you or your family need it
- ◆ Maintain a healthy diet and get some exercise and avoid things like too much caffeine or alcohol.
- ◆ Stay connected with those around you – don't isolate yourself or your children too much
- ◆ Take time to enjoy yourself, both with your children and on your own

Common reactions to major events

Children may react in different ways and at different times. Some may only be impacted for a short amount of time, others may experience the effects of the event for many months, but these should reduce gradually as time goes on. Remember that the reaction will also depend on their own stage of development and age, previous experiences, what support is available to them and the immediacy of the event to them and their normal life.

Some common reactions from children include:

- ◆ Increased clinginess
- ◆ Bed wetting
- ◆ Changes in appetite and eating habits
- ◆ Interrupted sleep or nightmares
- ◆ Anxiety and fear, especially when separated from familiar people
- ◆ Reduced confidence
- ◆ Crying for no obvious reason
- ◆ Feeling sick for no obvious reason (tummy ache, feeling sick)
- ◆ Increased tantrums or defiant behaviour
- ◆ Aggressive behaviour
- ◆ Increased bad behaviour or disobedience
- ◆ Increased attention-seeking behaviour and competition with siblings
- ◆ More frequent whining and complaining
- ◆ Fear of the dark or of being left alone
- ◆ Difficulty maintaining concentration
- ◆ More easily distracted
- ◆ Returning to early behaviour (e.g. thumb sucking)
- ◆ Poor/reduced performance at school
- ◆ Withdrawal, or lack of enjoyment, from playing and activities

When communicating with children, reassure them that they are safe and that the event wasn't their fault. If your children open up to you, listen carefully to their concerns, tell them it's okay to be upset and try to reassure them. Keep communicating with them and sharing information so they don't feel isolated from you.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Help them understand and be honest about what happened ◆ Listen to their concerns and answer their questions ◆ Keep a normal routine for bedtime, eating dinner together and getting ready in the morning ◆ Re-introduce responsibilities as soon as they can handle it ◆ Set aside time for the family to be together ◆ Encourage them to laugh, play and have fun ◆ Be honest and open with how you are feeling – chances are your children will have a fair idea already ◆ Allow children to cry and show emotion ◆ Let children be close to you – they may be feeling anxious to be alone ◆ Reassure them about the future and include them in planning ◆ Limit their access to media coverage of the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Let go of your established routines – it is important to keep as many aspects of their day to day unchanged ◆ Pretend that you are okay if you're not ◆ Expect children to recover quickly ◆ Expect children to open up to you ◆ Expect children to take on more/any responsibilities ◆ Tell children they have to be brave or 'grow up' ◆ Tell children they are behaving like a baby ◆ Make promises you might not be able to keep (i.e. if you need to move to a new house, don't promise that they will stay in the same school with their friends) ◆ Get angry if they express strong emotions ◆ Hide your own emotions – it's okay to share how you're feeling with children and shows them it's okay to show emotion ◆ Forget to praise them when appropriate

Your children may benefit from participating in activities to keep them busy and connected and it may help them to understand and express their feelings. Some helpful activities include:

- ◆ Spending time with animals
- ◆ Making art
- ◆ Age appropriate cooking (or helping)
- ◆ Music – listening, or learning to play
- ◆ Physical activity
- ◆ Gardening
- ◆ Meditation or relaxation techniques
- ◆ Writing
- ◆ Unstructured play
- ◆ Reading books
- ◆ Watching TV or movies
- ◆ Playing games