



Supporting children and young people through a traumatic experience

A guide for parents/carers

Rochdale educational psychology service



What is trauma?

Trauma refers to the natural human response to a highly stressful event. It refers to extreme stress that overwhelms a person's ability to cope, where the person's sense of safety and security is undermined. A traumatic event involves a single experience, or repeated, multiple experiences. It is usually something that was unexpected and there was nothing the person could do to stop it such as violence in the home, school or community, medical trauma, natural disasters, neglect, abuse, bereavement and war zone trauma. Anyone can experience trauma; no one is immune. Children and young people's reactions will vary and will be dependent on a multitude of factors, including the responses of key people around them and the social support structures in place. An important thing to note is that no-one is doomed to long-term emotional distress because of difficult life experiences. There are things we can all do, without specialist qualifications and expertise, to support children and young people through a traumatic event.

What are the signs my child is affected by trauma?

Every child and young person will respond differently to trauma. This means it can be difficult for you to spot the signs, or to see the links between a previous traumatic experience and your child's current feelings and behaviour. Sometimes your child may not be aware of the links themselves. Your child may show they are struggling immediately after a traumatic experience, but feelings, thoughts and behaviours may also emerge over time. There may be times when things feel intensely difficult, and then they might feel better for a while. These are some things you may see your child doing or experiencing following a trauma:

- Having memories, thoughts or flashbacks that seem to come suddenly from nowhere
- Having angry or aggressive outbursts
- Finding it difficult to calm down when they are distressed
- Withdrawing from friends, family and school and avoiding activities they usually enjoy
- Repeating certain behaviours or seeming agitated
- Seeming zoned-out or disconnected
- Having trouble concentrating and remembering things
- Not feeling able to sleep or having nightmares
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Eating significantly more or less
- Self-harming

These responses are often a young person's way of trying to manage, cope and express difficult feelings.

How can I help my child?

It is normal for a young person to feel or behave differently after a distressing or traumatic event or experience. As their parent, it's important to give them time to process and adjust to what's happened, while keeping an eye on how they're doing and seeking further help if it's needed.

- **Offer opportunities for them to talk to you** - Allow them to speak as often and for as long as they need to. Helping your child to make sense of what's happened and how they're feeling can make a huge difference. Let them take the lead and avoid asking too many questions.
- **Validate their feelings** - Repeat back the words they use to show you understand. You might say, "*It's really understandable that you're feeling...*"

to let them know that you've got it and their feelings are okay.

- **Provide a sense of safety**- A traumatic experience often involves feeling unsafe, frightened or out of control. If the people around them stay calm and provide consistency, routine and reassurance, you can help them feel like the world is a safe place again. Providing some normality i.e. doing some of the things you normally do, will help.
- **Reassure them** - Let them know you love them, you're there for them and you can help them find the right support if they need it.
- **Think together about what helps them cope with difficult feelings** - Knowing what works and trusting that they can help themselves when things are hard will help to build your child's belief in their ability to cope. Strategies could include running, drawing, listening to music, writing in a journal, talking to family or friends, watching a favourite film or reading a favourite book.
- **Spend quality time doing things your child enjoys** - This might be drawing, making something, playing games/sport, seeing friends, baking or watching a favourite film. Doing these kinds of activities can help them to feel safe and relaxed.
- **Seek professional support if you're worried** - Some, but not all young people who have experienced trauma, will need professional and specialist help to feel better. Over time, if you're worried that your child is still struggling, seek professional advice.
- **Look after yourself** - Supporting a young person who has gone through a trauma can be a very emotional and exhausting experience, so take time to look after yourself. This is especially important if you are also experiencing

traumatic events. You need to keep talking to friends, family and anyone else in your support network, taking time out and asking for help when you need it. If you feel that you need more support, you can ask for counselling or other support through your GP.

Useful helplines and websites

- **Kooth.com** - A free online and confidential mental health support for young people for young people aged 10-18. Search kooth.com to join for free.
- **Shout**. A 24/7 free text service, for anyone in crisis anytime. Text 85258 if you need immediate help.
- **Childline.org** - If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem. Sign up for a free Childline locker (real name or email address not needed) to use their free 1-2-1 counsellor chat and email support service. Can provide a BSL interpreter if you are deaf or hearing-impaired. Open 9am - midnight, 365 days a year. 0800 11 11
- **YoungMinds Textline** - Text YM to 85258. Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis.
- **Samaritans**. Whatever you're going through, you can contact the Samaritans for support. Open 24/7 116123 jo@samaritans.org Samaritans

Guidance adapted from www.youngminds.org.uk

