What can you do to help your child

Your child will need to feel safe with you and believe that you and other significant people in their lives can cope and manage whatever they are feeling and behaving. Your child may push boundaries but try to stay calm. They will want to know they are loved by you regardless of whatever has happened to them.

Let your child know that it is normal to have lots of different feelings and emotions after a trauma.

Help them accept whatever emotions they are feeling, empathise with them and acknowledge that the trauma they have experienced has been really tough. Let them know you think they are very brave and courageous.

Keep the routine going for your child as best as possible as this provides a sense of familiarity.

Distraction techniques can help take your child’s mind of what may be worrying them. Ideas include:

• Playing games.
• Singing songs or listening to music.
• Cooking.
• Drawing and painting.
• Playing with friends.
• Mindfulness activities.
• Swimming, ball games or other sporting activities.
• Creative activities.

How to get help

Many children will recover from traumatic experiences without any additional professional support, especially when symptoms are mild. However, some children will go on to develop more chronic symptoms that can last for a longer period of time. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the name given to describe these symptoms.

Psychological support can be very effective in helping people with PTSD. There are different types of therapies are available on the NHS including Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (tf-CBT).

It is important that you visit your GP as soon after your child’s trauma as possible. They can help to identify whether any further help is required and signpost your child to the most appropriate early support or more specialist psychological services if symptoms continue.

Useful Websites

www.emdrassociation.org.uk
www.traumaaiduk.org

©Alexandra Dent
What is psychological trauma?

A psychological trauma can occur when your child experiences either a single event or long lasting or repeated events that are so overwhelming it affects their ability to cope or make sense of what happened.

Examples of traumatic events include:
• Serious accidents i.e. road traffic collision.
• Loss and grief.
• Being told they have a life threatening illness.
• Physical, emotional or sexual abuse.
• Neglect.
• Natural or man-made disasters.
• Being taken hostage.
• Terrorist attacks.
• Bullying.

Everyone has different ways of responding to events. What one child finds traumatic another child may not find distressing.

It is very common for children to feel some degree of distress after a trauma. Most of the time this distress will improve over the days and weeks after the event. However, in some cases the distress can be longer lasting and continue for months or even years after the event.

Receiving the appropriate type of support can help your child come to terms with what has happened so that it does not continue to affect them for the rest of their life.

How your child may react

Children will react in a variety of different ways after a trauma. They may communicate their distress through their behaviours.

Typical behavioural reactions that your child may show include:
• Bedwetting.
• Stomach aches or headaches.
• Difficulty sleeping, nightmares or night terrors.
• Tantrums.
• Being clingy and not wanting to separate from you.
• Needing their comforters, dummies or cuddly toys more frequently.
• Regression (going backwards) in developmental milestones including speech and toileting.
• Dizzy or disorientated or appearing spaced out.
• Avoid going to certain places that remind them of what happened.
• Denying that something happened.
• Difficulty concentrating.
• Being very alert and sensitive to everything going on around them.

How your child may feel

Young children often do not have the words or understanding to tell you what they are feeling. It is important to remember that despite this, they will be experiencing a range of different feelings.

Some typical feelings they may have include:
• Anger – that something terrible has happened to them. They may be angry towards the people involved or angry at themselves that they didn’t do something to change the situation.
• Guilt – that they believed they should have done something to prevent the trauma happening or they may feel they were responsible or to blame. They may feel guilty that they survived when others didn’t.
• Frightened – that the trauma could happen again or that they are not safe anywhere or with anyone. They may feel too scared to tell anyone about what happened.
• Sad – about the trauma or if someone died or was injured.
• Ashamed or embarrassed – by what happened and are worried about telling anyone in case they get told off.