

General guidance for school staff when supporting pupils (any age) following a traumatic incident

Trauma, or traumatic incidents, often threaten our sense of safety, belonging and dignity. Such incidents may be one-off events or things that take place over the course of months and years. Traumatic events might be something we experience directly, or we might witness happening to someone else.

Examples of events that a child or young person might find traumatic include:

- Violent events, e.g. an assault, car accident, natural disaster
- Domestic violence and/or abuse
- Forms of discriminations, e.g. racism, homophobia, transphobia
- Sudden and unexpected death
- Serious physical illness, including time spent in hospital
- Exposure to frightening and inappropriate content, e.g. online content

It is important to remember that not all children and young people will be affected in the same way:

“Those who were standing on the edge of a cliff before this happened will be the first to fall off it.” (Cherry, 2020).

In the majority of cases, children and young people will have developed the skills needed to show resilience in the face of traumatic incidents, with current networks of support already in place. We should however be mindful of those identified as vulnerable, who may have fewer protective factors in their lives and for whom as a result, traumatic incidents may have a more significant impact.

Every child or young person's response to trauma is likely to be different; some may experience difficulties immediately after the event, or for others, difficulties may emerge over time. Their reactions and coping strategies may also vary over time. Some common reactions following a traumatic incident might include:

- Increased emotional outbursts, including feelings of anger, hurt, frustration
- Feeling overwhelmed by emotions and 'big feelings' they are experiencing
- Being on 'high alert' and sensitive to future threats
- Being pre-occupied by thoughts and flashbacks linked to the traumatic incident
- Avoidance of situations which are related to the incident
- Difficulties in attention and concentration
- Withdrawal from friends, family, school life and activities which they typically enjoy
- Blaming themselves for what has happened
- Reduced appetite or over eating
- Sleeping difficulties including experiencing nightmares
- Adopting maladaptive coping strategies, e.g. self-harm, substance misuse

We can help by remembering and reassuring that it is completely normal for a child or young person to feel or behave differently following a traumatic incident or experience. Other ways in which adults can support children and young people to cope include:

Be honest about what has happened - Give information and answer questions accurately in words that children/young people will understand (in line with their age and developmental stage). This includes saying, *"I don't know"*, if you don't. Be prepared for children and young people to ask the same questions multiple times. This is a way for them to process and begin to make sense of what has happened. Ensure your answers remain consistent.

Normalise their feelings – Reflect back words used by a child/young person to show that you understand their experience, or donate words if children and young people do not have the vocabulary to label their own feelings. Adults should not feel afraid to use powerful words, e.g. "terrified", "horrified" or "furious" to show you understand the severity of their feelings. Using Emotion Coaching scripts (see Example Emotion Coaching scripts document for further information), will also be very helpful, e.g. "It really understandable that you're feeling... I feel this way after what has happened too" to let them know their feelings are normal and valid.

Maintain familiar routines and structures - Maintaining familiar surroundings and routines e.g. bedtimes, mealtimes, school routines, resuming hobbies, clubs, outside activities etc., will provide some sense of normality and help to give a sense of security. Some children/young people may immediately wish to talk about what has happened, others may wish to engage in something practical, which can serve as a distraction from negative and painful thought and feelings. Other may take more time to absorb what has happened and prefer to maintain their normal routine.

Support them to think about coping strategies – Supporting children and young people to identify strategies which work for them will support their experience of 'big feelings' and emotions to feel less overwhelming. Strategies to trial could include; physical activity and exercise, drawing, listening to music, writing in a journal, talking to family and friends, watching a favourite film or reading a favourite book, colouring and mindful activities. Children and young people might like to develop a 'self-soothe box', containing things that they find helpful and they can access during times of difficulty.

Sympathetic listening – Children and young people need familiar and trusted adults who support them to talk about what has happened and express how they are feeling. They need to feel safe and cared for. They need affection, calm reassurance and clear information in words they can understand.

Allowing time for children and young people to adjust to what has happened - We should not expect things to get better straight away. Enhanced monitoring and sensitive 'check-ins' will help immediately after a traumatic event/experience.

Be aware that a child or young person's behaviour may regress - It is very common for children to temporarily revert to an earlier stage of development following a traumatic event or experience. After a short time, with pre-existing networks of support, any regression is likely to resolve itself. We can support by adjusting work expectations and demands for a short time and acknowledge that the quality of quantity of work produced may temporarily reduce. Consider pressure points in an academic year and inform external agencies for any external assessments, e.g. SATs/GCSEs/A-Levels, where appropriate.

Seek additional support if worries persist – Whilst the majority of children and young people will be very well supported by pre-existing networks of support, there may be occasions where specialist help and support may be required, should difficulties persist and continue to impact on daily life. Consideration could be given to whether a child or young person would benefit from an appointment with their GP (General Practitioner) alongside advice sought from agencies which could include the Educational Psychology Service, School Nursing Service. Further support and guidance can also be accessed from Young Minds:

[Trauma and Mental Health | Guide For Parents | YoungMinds](#)

[Trauma & Mental Health | Advice For Young People | YoungMinds](#)