

# For those whose child has experienced a serious event

It can be difficult to accept and come to terms with children experiencing serious events. When children are affected, it is important that adults, especially parents, are there to support them in the best possible way. It is no wonder that children react after difficult events. In order to help the child, you need to know what the normal reactions are, and understand that they are the child's way of dealing with the difficult thing that has happened or is happening. Children react differently, and some will not react at all. The child's age is also very significant. The key is to be attentive and responsive to the needs of the individual child. The vast majority of children who receive support, closeness and understanding based on their needs will get better again.

## Immediate reactions

Immediately after the event, children may feel scared, sad or confused. For some children, the emotions can become so strong that they "shut down". Young children may become apathetic and difficult to communicate with, and older children may be perceived as indifferent and avoiding contact with others. Children often find it difficult to understand what has happened, and what the consequences will be. The reactions of the adults around the child, especially the parents, will be important signals for the child. At the same time, the child's own experience of the event has been shown to have a significant impact on their emotional well-being. How the child experienced the danger to themselves or to their family matters a lot, not just how physically injured the child or family members were.

## Fear

When something serious happens, the feeling that the world is a safe place can vanish. Children can feel extra vulnerable, and afraid that something new will happen. Many people are scared by sudden events, and may become very frightened by loud noises or other things that remind them of the event. Fear of other things unrelated to the event, such as darkness, being alone, or being away from parents, may also increase. Children can show their anxiety in many different ways. Young children may become clingy, cranky and difficult to comfort, or may play in different ways to before. Older

children may become generally anxious, or they may lose interest in things they used to enjoy.

## Intrusive reminders

Anything that reminds the child of the event, including smells and flavours, can bring back past frightening experiences. What has happened can return as memories. Sometimes these memories can be frightening, and some children may avoid thinking about what happened so as not to get worried again. Other children may show what they have been through in games or drawings.

## Sleep problems and nightmares

It is common for children to have trouble falling asleep at night, or to wake up sad during the night, perhaps because of nightmares.

## Physical reactions

The body may react, and children may have stomach aches, headaches, or wet themselves. For a period of time, your child may not want to eat, or may eat more than usual.

## Relationships with others

Children may become more active, restless, and find it harder to focus. At the same time, they may become more irritable and angry. During the stressful period, the child may not be able to do things they have previously learned. For the child, this can lead to difficulties at school, and sometimes conflicts with parents, siblings, friends and other adults. If the adults around the child are understanding of the child's way of coping, the risk of the child feeling misunderstood and alone is reduced.

### **Changed thoughts**

The child's thoughts about fairness, for example that they got away lightly, unlike others, may be evoked. Or feelings of guilt, that the child thinks they did not behave as they should have. The belief that good things can happen, or that there is a future to plan for, may disappear for a time. Older children and young people may be preoccupied with thoughts of their own reactions to what has happened.

### **Children's need for play and joy**

Many children oscillate between being affected by what has happened, and then being happy and normal in play and contact with others. This is the child's own way of regulating what is difficult. It is important to allow the child to behave in a natural way in a difficult situation. This can also apply to adults, that we need to zoom in and out of the difficult things that have happened and are happening.

### **Some simple advice**

#### **It is normal for children to react**

Remember that it is normal for children to react after a serious event. This does not necessarily mean that the child is particularly sensitive, or that they will have problems in the long term. It is also normal for children not to react at all, this does not mean that they are insensitive. The important thing is to meet the child where they are. Try not to let your own worries affect the child too much.

#### **Being there**

The most important thing is that you are there for your child. Just sitting next to them, and showing that you care, can be valuable. During a period, closeness and physical contact are particularly important, sometimes at night as well.

#### **Talk to your child**

Give the child the opportunity to talk, as talking can help them to gain a better understanding of what has happened. Let the child approach the difficult thing in small steps with you, and follow the child's rhythm. Be responsive and ready to listen when your child wants to talk, even if you cannot give advice or answer their questions. If you, as an adult, take the initiative to talk about what has happened, and find that the child does not want to, wait and show that you

are available when the child needs you. Keep in mind that what you think worries your child may not be the same as what they are actually worrying about. It is important to listen actively to the child's experience. Encourage the child's own initiatives and suggestions.

### **Let the child express themselves in other ways**

Talking doesn't suit all children, and it may be difficult to put what has happened into words straight away. Give the child the opportunity to express themselves in other ways, for example by drawing, playing, writing, reading and listening to music. If you notice your child playing or drawing the same thing over and over again, you, as an adult, may need to step in. Together, you can take the game or story in a different direction, and let it have a better ending.

### **Give your child information**

Children, like adults, need help to understand, and they need information about what has happened and what will happen. They may also need to know why they and others around them react the way they do. Try to be honest, as it is best for the child in the long run. Adapt your communication to the child's level of development, and find out if they have really understood. At the same time, children do not need to hear everything, such as what adults are talking about on the phone. Watching TV, or learning about the event on the internet can scare the child all over again. Protect your child, and tell them what you know yourself.

### **Give the child hope**

It can be difficult for children to understand that things won't always be the way they are right now. As an adult, you may need to talk to your child about the fact that things will get better again. Children also need reassurance that they are now safe.

### **Activities and routines help**

It is good if the child can return to some kind of daily routine and normalcy as soon as possible. Having the opportunity to spend time with peers is also important for most children. Try to live as normally as possible with routines such as mealtimes and bedtimes. Exercising and participating in physical activities can also be encouraged and helpful.

### **Include the child**

When a loved one has died, children can attend funerals or other rituals whenever possible. The child needs to be well prepared for what is going to happen. An adult needs to be by the child's side during this time, and they need to be able to talk about their experiences afterwards.

### **Think about your needs as an adult**

As a parent, it can sometimes be difficult to know how your child is feeling, especially when you are also strongly affected by what has happened. Children are affected by how parents and other important adults feel and behave. It can be difficult to be enough for your child when you are not feeling well yourself. So make sure that you, as an adult, get the help you need, and accept support from others.

### **Let others read this information leaflet**

Because a child affected by a serious event may function and behave differently for a period of time, it is important for the people around them to know what the child has been through, and how they may react.

### **Seek help in time**

Children are developing, and may, in the event of strong or prolonged reactions that affect their lives to a great extent, need help from professionals outside the family. You can call 1177 Vårdguiden (the National Healthcare Counselling Service), on telephone number 1177, or contact a healthcare centre for help and support.

The material has been developed by Crisis and Disaster Psychology Unit, Specialist center within Region Stockholm, Healthcare.