

Children and young people's response to traumatic exposure

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

Each child's or adolescent's response will be unique, and a wide range of reactions are possible.

Their reaction will be influenced by their personality, what is happening in their life now and their ability to adjust to change. The young person, whatever age, needs to find safe ways to express their feelings. They may experience a range of emotions including confusion, anger, aggression, withdrawal, fear, guilt, denial, blame, betrayal, abandonment, hurt and sadness. Parental understanding, reassurance, and attention is very important at this time. Be guided by the young person's need to talk and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

Children and adolescents who have experienced other concerns or losses in their lives may find it harder to cope

Children and adolescents who have experienced other concerns or losses (eg. separation/divorce of parents, death of a relative or pet, moving house/school) may find it harder to cope. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even though they may have appeared to be coping before the event. If the young person is already using the services of a therapist for wellbeing concerns, you should ensure they are made aware of this event.

Children and adolescents may have many questions. They may want to know exactly what happened.

The school will have provided the young person with consistent information about the incident. Specific details about a traumatic event are not provided to students as this information can be potentially harmful to students' wellbeing. It is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help seeking" actions young people can take, such as talking to a trusted adult (e.g., parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend), or using the agencies or websites provided in the school letter.

"Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend."

This is an important message to share with young people in any discussion about the issues. Children and adolescents sometimes share their feelings with friends—in conversations, letters, emails, text messages, on the internet, etc. If children and young people are aware of friends who they fear may hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

Be aware that you or the young person may be affected by possible media responses to the event.

You may decide to protect against certain coverage or watch television news coverage together so that you can discuss any reactions or concerns and ensure the young person feels supported. Be aware that certain types of media reporting can add to a young person's vulnerability.

Some children and adolescents may show reactions weeks/months/a year after an event.



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If you are concerned about a young person's reactions—for example, if there are changes to their behaviour at school or at home—it is important to speak to the principal or student counsellor at the school. This may result in a referral to one of the agencies listed in the other attachment.

Be aware that school staff will also be affected

Some staff may also be managing difficult emotions. Adult counselling support is provided to all school staff through a process outside the school to ensure that excellent care is being provided to your child.

Respond to community concern with respect.

When speaking with other members in the community, respect the affected family and avoid sensationalising the tragedy. Encourage young people to seek help for their own wellbeing and when they have concerns about their friends.

Seeking help

Should you have any concerns about the issues raised in this pamphlet in relation to your child, we suggest you:

- Contact your GP
- Contact your Community Health Service
- Contact your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service office – [click here](#) for address and contact details for your nearest CAMHS.

Women's and Children's Hospital
72 King William Rd, North Adelaide SA 5006
Telephone (08) 8161 7000



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