

Helping your Child to Manage Unexpected Psychologically Challenging Events

When the unexpected occurs it is natural that we as parents become concerned about the effects of these incidents on our children. When children are closely affected by serious unexpected events it is understandable that parents become highly protective, and worry about their wellbeing. The challenge is to manage the situation in a thoughtful and effective manner so as to achieve good long term outcomes for your child. When parents are able to deal with the unexpected events calmly and confidently, they provide the best support to their child. A parent's reaction to an event will provide a model for their child's reaction. This may assist them to find strategies and solutions that work for them.

As stressful as some challenges may be – I believe that it is helpful to see the event as an opportunity to teach children that life is full of unexpected events, some good, some not so good, and some terrible, BUT that together as a family and as a community we can overcome anything that life may throw at us. A focus on strengths and resilience will help to psychologically protect children from further harm.

It is very important to acknowledge the seriousness of the incident. As a supportive and reflective listener, parents can provide children with opportunities to talk through the associated feelings and to offer comfort. Acknowledging that the child is sad, hurt, and frightened is a crucial part of a parent's support, as is reassurance that these feelings are natural and normal.

It is not helpful however to “interrogate” in regard to serious incidents, as any necessary investigation is best undertaken by professionals. Parental support which acknowledges the child's needs and boundaries is very reassuring to them that all will be “OK”. Children are likely to share more information in their own time. However, it should be remembered if children are not forthcoming that parental knowledge of every fact and detail is not essential for “healing”.

Key areas to focus on when supporting children:

1. Sense of safety
2. Ability to calm
3. Connectedness
4. Hope

Sense of Safety

- An unexpected event can leave children feeling unsafe and anxious. Measures or plans need to be put in place to ensure safety, and children need to be reminded often of these plans.
- Talk openly about dangers, but avoid alarming them unnecessarily. Use positive language to reassure children that together as a family you will get through these difficult times.
- Teach your child protective behaviours such as identifying their “trusted adult network” and “No Go Tell”.
- Provide opportunities for your child to talk through their concerns.
- Have family discussions about personal strengths and how family members have used these strengths in the past to deal with difficult or unexpected events. Other role models outside the family can also be cited.
- Avoid talking to other adults about the event in front of children as it can cause more distress.
- Stick to a normal family routine as much as possible. The predictability of the family schedule is reassuring for children.

Ability to calm

- Share with your child ways of self-soothing and calming oneself.
- Practice relaxation and mindfulness.
- Encourage regular exercise.
- Allow your child plenty of time for fun and play.

Connectedness

- Feeling positively connected to the community gives children and families a strong sense of wellbeing.
- Take time to get to know your neighbours, and make connections with other families in your local area.
- Consider joining local sporting groups which have a strong family focus.

Hope

- Encourage a sense of hope.
- Remind children that as a family you will find the strength to overcome these tough times.
- Remind children of what is going well in their lives and what they have to be grateful for.

When talking about an unexpected challenging event

- Reassure your child that the event is over and that they are now safe.
- Give your child your full attention and listen to how they are feeling.
- Don't quiz the child for detail or ask them to repeat their story.
- Talk about the event in a way which is appropriate to their level of understanding and without frightening them.
- Talk to your child about the different ways in which people react to unexpected events.
- Acknowledge that they may be feeling uneasy, and reassure them that these feelings will pass.
- Try not to be too overprotective. Children need to feel that they have control over their life and that their world is a safe place.

Do's and don'ts

In many circumstances the most important message to get across to your child is that you do not blame them for what has happened.

DO:

- Tell them you believe them
- Reassure and support them
- Tell them you do not blame them
- Tell them you will try to keep them safe
- Let them know you love them
- Let them know you are glad they told you
- Give them time to talk at their own pace
- Make time to spend with your child so you can talk privately
- Be open and clear
- Allow your child to talk about how they feel
- Try to be calm when talking with your child as they may be confused by anger
- Try to understand as much as you can about the effects of the event so that you can best support yourself and your child.

DON'T

- Talk about rumours or speculation about what happened when you don't have the facts
- Blame your child for what happened
- Blame yourself for what happened
- Tell your child that you blame yourself
- Suggest that it would have been better if they had not told anyone
- Tell your child to forget it ever happened
- Tell your child not to talk about it
- Get upset when your child talks about it.

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