

# **How to support a child after shocking (traumatic) events**

- **Maintain daily routines and be present in your child's life**
- **Talk about the event with your child**
- **Be aware of what your child reads in the newspaper or sees on television and regulate this if need be**
- **Allow different feelings and reactions**

## **Maintain daily routines and be present in your child's life**

After a shocking (traumatic) event the child's sense of safety may be shaken. The central concern for the child is whether he/she and his /her family are safe from now on. You can advance the return of the sense of safety by ensuring that the daily family routines continue; that mealtimes are followed, the child's bed time and sleeping routines are the same as before and free time activities continue. You can tell your child that the danger is over and that adults will do their best to secure their safety. Spending time together and enjoying activities together lets the child know that the shocking event is over. It might also be more important than before for the child to know how to contact parents when they are not with them.

## **Talk about the event with your child**

Do not be afraid to speak with your child about the event. Children usually know, hear and think much more than adults ever expect them to. Children need truthful information about the shocking event, which is provided by adults. You can start by finding out what your child already knows or what he/she has seen. It is good to talk with the child about what he/she has heard others saying about the event. It is important for an adult to help a child distinguish between facts, rumours and products of their imagination. Children's understanding and questions change in the course of time. Thus it is important to be available to the child and ready to talk and give more information when the child returns to speaking about the event.

## **Be aware of what your child reads in the newspaper or sees on television and regulate this if need be**

After a catastrophic event adults have an accentuated need to hear the latest news about the event. However, research has shown that unexpected news and pictures from television are scary and can bring back stress-related problems. Small children can get confused because the same shocking pictures are shown again and again. This can lead them to conclude that the series of events is still going on. Even for older children, seeing too much news about the event can be overwhelming and increase feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

## **Allow different feelings and reactions**

It is important to remember that children's reactions depend on age, personality and coping style. It is usual that the child is clingier, does not want to leave his/her parents and wants to stay close. Some

children want to speak about the details of the event, some are quiet and worried, some are extremely sad or occasionally angry, some are more active than usually, and some want to continue as though nothing special has happened. The mood of the child can fluctuate, and different reactions can occur at different times. Children are often confused about what has happened and also confused about their own feelings. Not all children react immediately. Reactions can appear after days, weeks or even months. The child's personal way to process the shocking events, which he/she faced, should be respected. Processing the event should be paced by the child's internal schedule. However, it is worth of encouraging the child to express his/her feelings in a way that is natural to him/her and age-appropriate: by speaking, writing, drawing or playing.

If the child keeps on asking the same thing again and again, he/she is probably just trying to understand the event that has shaken his/her world and to cope with his/her confusion. For example, younger children do not understand that death is final, but they might ask questions repeatedly because they suppose that everything will return to as it was before the event. It is good to listen carefully to the child. If it appears that he/she is blaming him/herself somehow about the event, it is important to explain the facts and take care that the child does not continue blaming him/herself.

### **Professional help is often needed if:**

- the child is withdrawing from friends and/or adults
- the child's behaviour and personality are changing significantly
- the child lacks social support
- the child's school achievements are decreasing
- the child is showing strong and continuous avoidance-behaviour or is strongly and continuously suppressing feelings
- the child has hallucinations or his/her speaking lacks unity
- the child is continuously repeating the event
- the child has fear reactions
- the child is strongly blaming him/herself
- the family and the family atmosphere are negative