

TIPS for...

TALKING TO CHILDREN & YOUTH ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Talking to children about a recent tragedy can be hard and you may not know where to start. You may be scared of saying the wrong thing and causing more harm than good. But the reality is, the unfortunate task of talking to children following the aftermath of a traumatic event, may fall into the hands of educators, parents, grandparents, social workers, psychologists, counsellors, and other responsible adults.

Although children may require additional professional psychological help, there are things we can do to provide a sense of understanding and security.

“ We invite you to remember these TIPS by **HEART**

H

Have patience & be available

E

Emphasize safety & security

A

Acknowledge

R

Reassure & validate

T

Truth & honesty



Have patience & be available

- Children may not want to open up right away - they may not want to talk or they might not have the words to describe what they are feeling. Check in with them regularly. Be patient with them and make yourself available for when they are ready.

On this page, we list 5 effective
TIPS for...
Talking to Children About
Traumatic Events

Emphasize safety & security

- Let children know that they are safe. Shape spaces in which they can feel safe. Talk to them about their worries, otherwise it will be harder to find ways in which you can help.
- When children ask questions regarding their safety, let them know that these events don't happen often and remind them about all the people who work hard to keep them safe: ex. police officers, parents, and teachers
- Safety can also be achieved by enacting a specific schedule and/or routines. This predictability can create a feeling of safety.

Acknowledge...

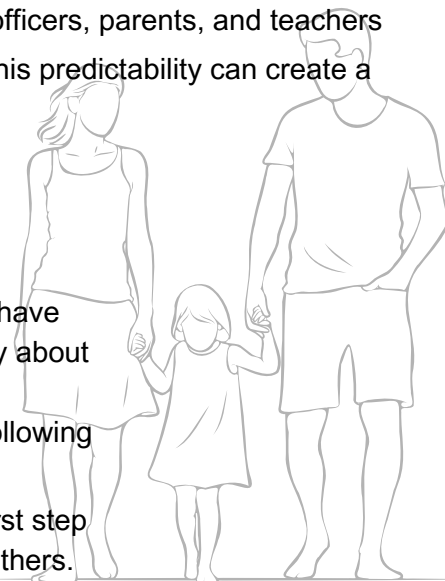
That it
happened

Their
feelings

Your
feelings



- It is likely that children have already heard about the event. Acknowledging that it actually happened is a helpful first step following a traumatic event.
- Children feel their feelings deeply, even if they don't have the words to express them. Telling them to "not worry about it", or "everything will be ok" is not comforting. Acknowledging their feelings, and their behaviours following trauma makes children feel validated and supported.
- Acknowledging your own feelings to yourself is the first step responsible adults can take in order to be helpful to others. Responsible adults can be a model for coping strategies when they eat right, sleep right, take breaks when they need to, and take time for themselves.



Reassure & validate

- There is no "normal" reaction to trauma. However, showing children that it's okay to be feeling what they're feeling is an effective way to make them feel validated.
- Atypical behaviours make sense, given the unfortunate context. Recognizing these behaviours by identifying patterns, and responding appropriately (e.g., praise, reinforcement, goal-setting, problem-solving) can provide children with additional reassurance and validation that you are there to support them and work through the trauma rather than punish them.

Truth & honesty

- Find out what children know first. Children listen to everything and may "fill in the gaps" with information they get from social media or other outside sources. This could further increase their anxiety around the event. Take time with them to explain what happened and be the source of accurate and honest information.
- Most importantly, know that it's okay not to have all the answers - but offer to find them.

- Be honest but also be mindful of the child's age and use age appropriate language:

- 6-10 - this age range needs simple information - keep it brief and lots of reassurance about safety including examples (i.e., locked doors, emergency drills)
- 11-15 - this age range may ask more questions - keep the answers brief but honest. At this age, these questions may be coming from worry. Reassure them they are safe.
- 16-18 - this age range will have opinions of their own. Communicate with them and remind them you are there if they need.

