

How can I help my child?

A guide for parents of children involved in, or affected by, road trauma

This document lists common reactions to serious road trauma and suggests ways in which parents and other adults can provide support to bereaved and traumatised children and teenagers.

We hope the following information will be helpful to you and your child.

Following road trauma, children and adolescents who have been affected may not be able to describe how they are feeling and may express themselves in ways that differ to those of adults. Children may find it hard to understand what has happened. Be aware that the reality of what has happened will probably 'sink in' as they grow and develop.

When a family member (or members) is involved in a serious or fatal collision, the whole family (including very young children) is affected.

This brochure lists common reactions to serious road trauma events and suggests ways in which parents and other adults can provide support to bereaved and traumatised children and teenagers.

Infancy to five

Children under two years of age can be greatly affected by the emotions of those around them, especially the emotions of parents and siblings. As a result of the distress within the family, young children may become fussy, irritable, clingy and harder to calm down. They may have distressing dreams or nightmares. They may regress in their behaviour.

What can help?

It is important for parents and other adults to try to maintain the child's routine. Children need to feel safe and supported. They need clear factual answers to their questions. Tell them the facts in an age-appropriate way. Try not to tell children that everything is fine. This statement does not match the reality of what children are experiencing and observing, and therefore can be very confusing. It is probably much better to say that things will be fine 'after a while'. Reassure them that they are not to blame for what has happened, and that they are safe and much-loved.

One of the best ways to communicate with young children is to sit and play with them. Preschool children have a well developed imagination. They often play games and incorporate events in their lives, including trauma or death, into their games. These games can be important in helping them make sense of what has happened. By joining in aspects of their play, you can provide them with the opportunity to let you know about their concerns, worries and questions. Listening to them respects and validates their opinions and beliefs, and provides a starting point for further conversations.

Primary School Age

Primary school aged children (six to twelve years of age) may hide their own feelings to protect a parent or another family member who may be grieving or distressed. Children may worry about who will look after them if a parent or other caregiver dies. They may regress in their behaviour or their school performance may deteriorate. They may complain about some physical reactions such as stomach ache or headaches. They may 'act out' feelings rather than talk about them.

What can help?

In responding to children who are grieving or traumatised, it is important to reassure them that they are safe and will be cared for. If you can, ask your children what they are thinking and imagining. This is helpful in addressing any misunderstandings or unnecessary fears. Answer all questions simply and directly. Avoid making the trauma event or the death of a loved one a taboo subject.

Reading books with parents is a form of play that many primary school age children enjoy. There are books about death and trauma that can be read with children. Drawing pictures or writing about the event can also be helpful.

It is important to reassure your child that grief is OK and that trauma reactions are normal. Acknowledge that they are experiencing feelings such as sadness, anger and fear and that you understand those feelings. Let them know that you are also experiencing similar feelings, and that these feelings are normal and natural. You can also assist your children in developing the words to describe their own thoughts and feelings.

Teenagers

Normal adolescence is a time of physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and sexual changes. Moodiness, restlessness and insecurity commonly alternate with excitement, happiness and adventurousness. Adolescence can be a bewildering developmental stage at the best of times - let alone when there is the added stress associated with grief and / or trauma. Following road

trauma, some teenagers may become irritable, impulsive and uncooperative. School performance may suffer.

What can help?

It is important that adults within the teenager's support network, including teachers, make allowances for these behaviours. Give teenagers time to work through their feelings and let them know that it is okay to express their feelings in their own way and in their own time.

Some teenagers may ask many searching questions about the death or trauma, others may be more private and may talk very little about it. When asked, give them accurate information about the event and its consequences. If you can, correct any misunderstandings or unwarranted fears.

Be available if they want to talk but resist any desire to 'fix' your child. Talk openly and share your thoughts and feelings. Conversations can often be more effective if teenagers don't feel pinned down. Important conversations can take place in the car, doing chores or playing with pets. In this way, eye contact can be avoided by the adolescent and he or she may feel more in control of their emotions.

Let them know about how you are feeling. Explain about grief and/or stress reactions. Even if they don't admit it, they probably will take in what you have said.

It may not be unusual for your child to seem reticent or unwilling to talk about "it". This is not uncommon and the child's view should be respected at that time. While distressing for parents when their child is quiet, reserved or just not the same, it is important that the child knows that you will always be there for them when they feel the need to raise questions or ask to talk.

Maintain routine and familiar activities. Minimise change. Reassure teenagers about the future, especially that their current distress will pass in time.

Allow your teenager to have time alone.

Many adolescents are more likely to seek support from their peers, preferring to talk to their friends rather than to their parents. This is natural and normal in terms of their development. Encourage supportive relationships with peers. Be aware though, that some adolescents may prefer to hide their feelings from their peers, so as not to be singled out as different.

Inform your teenager's school of the trauma event.

In many ways children are very resilient. Confirmation you are there when they need you means that an important link for future communication, understanding and support has been established.

Like adults, most children and teenagers will adapt and grow through crisis with the love and support of their family and friends. Trauma provides teenagers with opportunities for growth and discovery about themselves. With help, teenagers can eventually mature as a result of their experience. They often show strength and resilience that has not been evident before.

However, don't hesitate to seek advice if you do not understand any aspect of your child's behaviour or if you have any questions. Talk to your family doctor, school counsellor, psychologist, social worker or a qualified counsellor experienced in grief and trauma. To confidentially discuss any of the issues raised within this document, please call Road Trauma Support Services Victoria.

Road Trauma Support Services Victoria is a not-for-profit organization offering support to anyone in Victoria affected by road trauma – bereaved family members, drivers, witnesses, those who assisted at the scene, passengers, pedestrians, people who have been injured, and friends and family of the above.

Counselling and support services are provided free of charge.

Free call: 1300 367 797