

Childhood trauma reactions: How and when to get help

Educators are often in the best position to notice when children need help managing their reactions to traumatic events, such as natural disasters. However, it can be quite difficult to work out what is happening for the child by simply observing their behaviour. Here are some hints for how you can work out when and what you might need to do to arrange help for your students.

Talk to the child

One of the best ways to work out if the child needs help is to talk to them. There are a few things you can do to make this a bit easier:

- Let your student know that you are concerned and want to help. Having someone who will listen is often exactly what children are after.
- Consult the school counsellor or guidance officer if you think you need help or the child prefers not to talk.
- Get background information. Talk about your concerns with the child's parents/caregiver.

Dealing with disclosures

Sometimes when talking to children, they may disclose sensitive information, either about the traumatic event you are discussing, or about other events that you were not aware of. It is important for teachers to be aware of their duties and responsibility to both the child and others, and to consult with school administrators where appropriate.

How to determine whether the problem is serious?

It is normal for children to show some changes in behaviour or difficulties managing emotions immediately following a traumatic event. Fortunately, the majority of children are resilient and will return to their normal functioning over time. However, some children will experience more intense and interfering reactions or reactions that persist over time, which most often benefit from further assessment and intervention.



Further assessment or intervention may be required if the child shows:

- symptoms which persist for longer than a month or worsen over time
- a significant decline in concentration, academic performance or classroom participation that interferes with their daily functioning or causes significant distress
- ongoing or worsening difficulties regulating emotions (e.g. difficulty controlling emotions such as crying, anger)
- significant and lasting changes in social functioning (e.g. withdrawing from friends, fighting, interpersonal difficulties, physical and verbal aggression) that causes problems for the child or others
- behaviours that disrupt others and the classroom environment on a regular basis
- behaviours or difficulties that prevent the child from engaging in age-appropriate tasks or developing appropriately (e.g. advancing academically, advancing socially, maturing appropriately, interruptions to developmental milestones such as speech, and language)
- behaviours typical of a younger child (e.g. difficulties toileting, using 'baby talk')
- evidence that the problems exist outside of school as well (i.e. the problem occurs in multiple settings such as at home, with friends, at school); or
- the presence of ongoing stressors outside of school which may exacerbate difficulties (e.g. financial difficulties, housing issues, parental separation, death of a family member).

How to get help

There are many different ways in which you can help the child and their family. It is important to know when you can help, when to utilise school-based resources and when you might need to make a referral to an external agency. Below are some guidelines/suggestions for what you can do when you think a child needs further help:

- Familiarise yourself with your school's guidelines and policies for such issues.
- Get to know the support resources available within your school such as guidance officers, school nurses, school psychologists, support workers and principals.
- Think about what you as an educator can do to help the child or the whole class following traumatic events.
- Refer the child on for further assistance.

How to refer for further help

Sometimes, no matter how supportive the classroom or home environment is, a child may still require professional assistance following a traumatic event. It may be helpful to discuss referral options with parents and/or the child. Early intervention is considered important.

Community services and help lines

There are some services that parents and children (and educators) can access at any time, without having to see someone in person. Many of these can be found on the internet, and a few key services are listed below. Your guidance officer or school counsellor might be able to help you find more services available in your area.

- Kids Helpline – 1800 551 800
- Lifeline – 13 11 14
- Parentline – 1300 30 1300
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – 1800 642 066
- beyondblue – www.beyondblue.org.au
- Carers Australia – 1800 242 636

General practitioners

GPs are a great place to start for information, support and referral if required.

Private allied health professionals

Children and parents can also seek private individual assistance from various allied health professionals – in particular, clinical psychologists who are trained in assessment, diagnosis and treatment of various emotional and behavioural difficulties in childhood and adolescence.

Community-based mental health professionals

Families may be eligible to receive assistance through their local Child and Adolescent/Youth Mental Health Service (CAMHS or CYMHS). In most instances, families are able to self-refer for this service by calling their local centre.

Infant and baby mental health services

Each state and territory of Australia will have a dedicated perinatal and infant mental health service operated by the government. Families should visit their GP to gain further information.

Private mental health professionals

Families are also able to arrange for assistance through private psychologists. Availability of psychologists will vary according to location, and it is recommended that families first contact their GP to obtain a referral and to assess their eligibility for rebates through Medicare. In addition, families may also be eligible for rebates through private health funds and should contact their health provider to enquire about rebates. Parents may also independently seek private practitioners through the Australian Psychological Society (APS) at www.psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist

This tip sheet was originally developed by the Centre of National Research on Disability and Rehabilitation Medicine, University of Queensland as part of the Queensland Government's response to the Queensland Natural Disasters. [Kenardy, De Young, Le Brocque & March. (2011) Brisbane: CONROD, University of Queensland]. The materials and content have been revised and extended for use as part of the Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health Community Trauma Toolkit.

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