

# Supporting your child or young person after a crime or traumatic event



*When children and young people of any age or stage face tough life situations they need the loving care and support of family, whānau, and others around them. They will react to the situation in their own individual ways. They need to be safe, and feel safe, and know that someone will take care of them. They need reassurance and help to learn ways to cope with any strong feelings or difficult thoughts. The better the ongoing support, the better a child or young person can come through this difficult time.*

## Infants and toddlers

0 - 2 YEARS OLD

Can't understand what's happening.  
Can sense when others are stressed and upset.  
Don't have language to express themselves.  
Need adults for comfort and reassurance.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- fretful, distressed
- crying or screaming more
- clingy
- jumpy, easily startled
- irritable
- less active or responsive
- changes in feeding and sleeping patterns
- changes in bowel and bladder patterns
- possible weight loss
- more likely to pick up viruses or bugs.

### GIVE THEM SUPPORT

- look after their immediate needs well
- speak calmly and be gentle
- keep their environment as calm as possible
- hold and cuddle them more – minimise separations
- provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket etc.
- keep up their routines as much as possible
- be patient and show kindness.

Seek some extra help for your infant or toddler if you sense any changes that are ongoing and concerning you.  
Contact your doctor or Plunket Nurse. See pages 2-5 for ideas about supporting them as they get older.

#### CONTACT

#### Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)  
enquiries@victimsupport.org.nz  
victimsupport.org.nz



## Young children 3 - 5 YEARS OLD

Can only understand simple things about what's happened, may become confused.

Sense when others around them are stressed and upset.

Can appear unaffected but will be reacting inside. Reactions will usually come in bursts.

Have limited language to express their feelings and needs.

Need adults for comfort and reassurance.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- distressed, more anxious, crying more, or emotionally numb
- more anxious, clingy
- irritable, more tantrums
- quiet and withdrawn
- less active or has more energy than usual
- confused, may ask many questions (often the same ones)
- can believe their thoughts can affect events ('magical thinking') - such as, thinking if they behave or eat their vegetables someone will come back to life, or thinking something they said or did made someone leave or an event happen
- changes in eating and sleeping, toileting issues, stomach aches, possible weight loss, more likely to pick up viruses or bugs
- temporary regression in their development, such as wanting to have a bottle or be breast fed again, crawling instead of walking, talking less, finding learning things a bit harder.

### GIVE THEM SUPPORT

- speak calmly, be gentle, keep things calm around them
- tell them who's looking after them, reassure them they're safe and loved
- spend more time with them, limit separations
- show affection, hug them more
- provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket
- explain things simply, check they understand, answer questions, repeat information if it's needed – minimise exposure to media about what happened
- listen to their worries and feelings, teach them some words to describe their feelings
- reassure them it's not their fault
- encourage them to play, be creative, and distract themselves
- keep up their normal routines as much as possible, although some flexibility may be needed at times
- give them choices when possible, which helps when everything else seems out of their control
- be patient and show kindness.

Also see page 7 for information on helping them become more calm.  
See page 8 for information on when to seek some extra help for your child,  
and pages 3-6 for ideas about supporting them as they get older.

## Primary aged children

6 - 10 YEARS OLD

Can understand the key facts about what's happened but may still misunderstand and get confused about some aspects of the situation.

Can sense when things around them 'feel wrong' and others are stressed and upset. May try to help them feel better.

May act as if nothing has happened but be reacting internally.  
Reactions will usually come in bursts.

Have more language to express thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and needs.  
Can struggle to express and manage strong feelings and troubling thoughts.

Can ask some direct, even blunt questions. Sometimes might repeat the same questions.

May find concentrating and learning more difficult at this time.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- distressed, more anxious, crying more, wonder if they're normal, overwhelmed at times, or emotionally numb
- irritable, more tantrums, acting out, becoming defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behaviour, or consistently trying to 'be very good'
- more insecure, clingy, wanting to be near family, caregivers, closest friends
- may blame themselves for what has happened
- may use some magical thinking e.g. if they behave/eat their vegetables someone will come back to life. Or thinking something they said or did made someone leave or an event happen
- feeling embarrassed and different from others and so may hide feelings or withdraw
- difficulty concentrating, distracted, preoccupied, forgetful, may ask questions repeatedly
- avoiding school, school work standards going down or working very hard to 'be good'
- less active or more energetic than usual
- changes in appetite and sleeping patterns, or toileting issues, digestion or stomach ache issues, possible weight loss, headaches, more susceptible to illness/bugs/colds/viruses
- anxious or restless at night, may have bad dreams or even flashbacks about what happened (reliving it), might refuse to sleep alone
- temporary regression in confidence, such as talking less or avoiding usual activities and social events.

## Primary aged children 6 - 10 YEARS OLD

### **GIVE THEM SUPPORT**

- speak gently and calmly, keep things calm around them as much as possible
- explain things simply, use bite-sized pieces of information, check they understand, answer their questions, repeat information as needed – minimise exposure to media about what happened
- tell them who's looking after them, reassure them often that they are safe and loved
- spend more time with them, limit separations
- show affection, hold and hug them more if they find that helpful
- encourage them to talk and listen to them, teach them words to describe their feelings
- reassure them that...
  - it's not their fault
  - they are not alone – others love and support them (name them)
  - they and the family and whānau are going to be okay
  - they can talk about what's happened with people they trust when they want to (name these people)
  - they won't always feel like they do now - their reactions are normal and will start to settle down
  - even if difficult reminders come along like a wave, they will get through those times one by one
- help them work out what they're feeling - this can help them understand what's affecting them and why
- encourage them to express themselves in their own way to release tensions, such as through play, art, music, dance, actions, sports, being physically active, doing things they enjoy, or talking to those they trust
- encourage them to look after themselves extra well right now - eating healthy food, getting enough rest and sleep, doing some exercise, doing things that lift their spirits
- work with their teacher/s and school to support them too
- involve them in family discussions and choice making, if possible, and give them options
- provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket
- keep to their normal routines and activities as much as possible, although some flexibility may be needed at times
- be patient and show kindness.

**Also see page 7 for information on helping them become more calm.  
See page 8 for information on when to seek some extra help for your child,  
and pages 5-6 for ideas about supporting them as they get older.**



## Young people 11 - 18 YEARS OLD (INTERMEDIATE AGE AND TEENS)

Can understand key facts about what has happened, and the consequences, but is likely to want ongoing honest, reliable updates.

More able to express themselves but may still struggle to cope with intense feelings such as anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, social embarrassment, or a sense of rejection.

May act as if nothing's happened but be reacting internally. They can mask feelings with other behaviour, like acting out or clowning around.

May find concentrating and learning more difficult at this time.

Might ask some big questions about life they haven't asked before.

May find unhelpful behaviours to cope, including alcohol or other drugs or other risky activities.

Remember they're also experiencing the normal challenges of adolescence too.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- distressed, increased anxiety, crying more, possibly emotionally numb
- more anxious about the safety of family, whānau, friends, and themselves – wants to be near others more
- may blame themselves for what's happened, or blame others
- quiet and withdrawn or wants to be with others more
- may want to talk a lot about what's happened or may not at all
- embarrassed and feeling different from peers, may hide feelings, avoid talking, socially withdrawn, lonely
- distracted, forgetful, hard to concentrate on things
- changes in performance at school and/or work, may avoid school or work commitments
- irritable, more mood swings, acting out, becoming defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behaviour – or may try very hard to please adults and not worry them, to keep things 'happy'
- may take on more adult responsibilities to try to 'fix things'
- changes in appetite and sleeping patterns, headaches, digestion or stomach ache issues, bedwetting or soiling, more susceptible to illness/bugs/colds/viruses, acne flare ups, possible weight loss
- restless at night, may find sleep difficult, may have bad dreams or even flashbacks about what happened (reliving it)
- negative thoughts, possible suicidal thinking



## Young people 11 - 18 YEARS OLD (INTERMEDIATE AGE AND TEENS)

### **GIVE THEM SUPPORT**

- calmly acknowledge what's happened, give honest, clear information, check they understand, welcome questions
- encourage them to limit media and social media exposure about what's happened if it starts to dominate, and balance it with some 'time off'
- reassure them they're safe and loved, encourage them regularly, acknowledge that how they're feeling and thinking is a normal reaction to difficult circumstances
- give them time and attention, show affection and kindness, offer more hugs, help them feel included in family events and consulted about family choices
- encourage them to talk, listen to them well, respect their choice if they don't want to talk to you
- help them work out what they're feeling – this can help them understand what's affecting them and why
- encourage them to express themselves and release tensions through play, art, music, dance, writing, being physically active, and other things they enjoy
- keep up normal routines and activities, enable time with their friends, encourage being in nature
- don't expect more from them – let them be the age and stage they are
- work with their school and/or workplace to support them too
- be patient and show kindness, especially if relationships are strained in these stressful times.

Also see page 7 for information on helping them become more calm.  
See page 8 for information on when to seek some extra help for your child.  
See page 9 for ideas about supporting them as they get older.



## Help your child or young person to find ways to keep calm

*When children or young people are anxious, very upset, or angry there are helpful things they can learn to do to settle down their thoughts and feelings and feel more in control. These things can take some practice, but most are easy to do.*

**Supportively teach them how to...**

- ☐ take several slow, deep belly breaths – in through the nose, out through the mouth (try doing this together)
- ☐ have a drink and perhaps something healthy to eat, which focuses their thoughts on something else for a while
- ☐ stop, look around, name some things they can see, hear, taste, smell, or touch
- ☐ pause and count slowly to 10 or 20 when feelings are rising (breathe slowly in between)
- ☐ relax from head to toe by tensing their body's muscles, counting slowly to three and then relaxing – start at the feet and gradually move up through the body
- ☐ imagine their worries, screw them into a very tight fist, then release them to fly away
- ☐ take a mental holiday by visualising a safe and happy place or person that they can visit and think about in their imagination
- ☐ choose some relaxing music to listen to
- ☐ spend time doing an activity that they think relaxes them – watching a movie, reading, art, playing a sport, making something etc.
- ☐ spend relaxing time with family, whānau and friends, or with a pet
- ☐ spend time outside near nature
- ☐ move and exercise to release stress and feel a bit better

### **Why routines are so important and helpful**

In difficult times, everyday routines help children and young people feel more safe and secure. They help them see there are still some things that are familiar and more 'normal' that they can expect and rely on. If the situation needs it, you can always start new regular routines. Supportive routines include having regular snacks and meals, having time each day for exercise or play, going to school, doing their chores, spending time with friends, helping them get to usual activities, and having a regular time for getting up, bath or shower, teeth, and sleep. These simple sorts of things give them clear and consistent expectations and helpful boundaries. They can help them relax more. Predictability is actually comforting and reassuring.



### ***When to seek some extra help for your child or young person***

If you notice concerning changes in their wellbeing or behaviour that are ongoing or increasing, or that are sudden and out of character, take time to talk with them. (If they are very young, seek advice from your doctor or Plunket nurse.)

Let them know you care and are concerned for them. Listen well. Ask what they most need and how you can support them. Explain that getting some extra help could make a positive difference.

Don't hesitate to contact a support professional for help and advice. For example, your family doctor or nurse, their teacher or school, a counsellor or psychologist, social worker, children's worker, youth worker, or a family support agency. If they are old enough, they may want to do this help-seeking themselves. Support them to do this.

#### ***Things to watch for include:***

- high levels of ongoing fear and anxiety that disrupt their life, such as panic attacks, nightmares, flashbacks (reliving what happened), extreme clinginess, or extreme avoidance of reminders
- disturbing physical reactions, such as lack of appetite, unable to sleep, bedwetting or soiling, falling ill more often, developing a stutter, or other physical complaints
- a preoccupation with what happened, wanting to talk about it a lot – or won't ever acknowledge or talk about what happened
- intense feelings of guilt and self-blame for what's happened
- extreme mood swings, severe irritability, aggression, or violence towards others
- an ongoing flatness and low mood suggesting possible depression
- a significant drop in school grades, or a rise due to driving themselves to 'be good'
- isolated and withdrawn from friends, family, and normal social situations
- taking on worries and responsibilities of adults that are not appropriate for their age and stage
- increased risk taking that puts them in danger, like drinking, drugs, reckless sex, fast driving, or gambling
- self-harming, talking about wanting to die, or threatening to hurt self or others
- a dramatic change in personality or ability to function.

**If they're in immediate risk of harm dial 111 for ambulance assistance.**

#### ***Need to talk to someone about your concerns urgently?***

You can free call or text the helpline 1737 any time 24/7 to talk to a trained counsellor for advice. Or talk to a Victim Support Worker for help to find local services to support your child or young person during this difficult time. Please call us on 0800 842 846 to be connected with a Support Worker day or night. And remember, look after yourself too.



## As they get older

It's helpful to know that when a child or young person has been affected by significant trauma or loss, memories and reactions can resurface (or even appear for the first time) any time afterwards – even months or years later. Milestone events can especially trigger this, such as special dates or events. This is normal. They will need continuing support as they grow and develop, as well as ongoing reassurance and opportunities to talk about what happened and ask questions. This can help them make sense of things as they get older and figure out who they are.

Sometimes it can even be in young adulthood that questions get asked about events that happened long ago. Everyone makes sense of their life in their own ways, and in their own time. Building a strong relationship with your child or young person is the best foundation for any conversations that may come in the future.

If you notice any worrying or extreme behavioural or health reactions at any point after trauma or loss, it is important for the child to get help from a doctor or other professional, such as a psychologist or counsellor, school staff and specialists. Expert interventions can make a positive difference.



## Recommended Resources

### ***Trauma - How To Talk To Your Kids About It (Kidshealth NZ)***

Some resources, in a range of languages, about how to talk to kids about trauma can be found on the NZ Kids Health website at [www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about](http://www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about)

### ***NZ Ministry of Education info sheets for Parents/Caregivers***

This information was developed following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2011, however the advice remains relevant after any major traumatic event. Scroll down to After an Emergency resources to Supporting People to see the range available.

[www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/](http://www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/)

### ***Skylight resources and support packs***

Skylight makes available for purchase or loan a wide range of resources for all ages and stages, including the workbooks *Something Has Happened* (3-6 year olds) and *When Tough Stuff Happens* (7-12 year olds). They also offer free information packs tailored to your child's situation. Phone them 0800 299 100 or 04 939 6767 weekdays, or visit [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

## Counselling Support Options

### ***Different organisations around the country offer counselling and support for children and young people.***

These links provide a list of the ways you can look for a child or youth counsellor in your area.

- Search for services in your own area on this online Family Services Directory: <https://family.services.govt.nz/#/> Look in the category *Family/Whānau* services for *Counselling*, then add in your location.
- [www.talkingworks.co.nz](http://www.talkingworks.co.nz) (Talking Works)
- NZ Association of Counsellors 04 471 0307 [www.nzac.org.nz](http://www.nzac.org.nz) - see search for a NZAC Counsellor
- NZ College of Clinical Psychologists 04 472 4088 includes a directory and downloadable lists: *Find a Clinical Psychologist*
- NZ Psychological Society 04 473 4889 [www.psychology.org.nz](http://www.psychology.org.nz) includes a directory: *Find a Psychologist*
- [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor) (NZ Mental Health Foundation)

Or call or text 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor about your concerns (24/7) and find out about services in your area.

Examples of national organisations you can contact include:

- Barnardos  
[www.barnardos.org.nz](http://www.barnardos.org.nz) 0800 BARNARDOS (0800 227 627)
- Skylight  
[www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz) FREEPHONE: 0800 299 100
- Family Works, Provided by Presbyterian Support Services.  
[www.familyworks.org.nz](http://www.familyworks.org.nz) 0508 TO HELP (0508 864 357)
- Māori Women's Welfare League offers Whānau Toko i te Ora parenting programme for under five-year-olds. Branches throughout New Zealand. Email [mwwl@mwwl.org.nz](mailto:mwwl@mwwl.org.nz) Phone 04 473 6451

### ***In crisis right now?***

- For urgent mental health support for your child or young person in your area see [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/) for a list of your local DHB services for children and young people
- If it is an emergency, such as a suicide threat, call 111 and ask for assistance, or visit a doctor or hospital emergency department as soon as possible with your child or young person.

### ***Helplines for children and young people***

- *What's Up*  
Kids and teenagers up to 18 years old can talk with professional counsellors. Available 1pm–11pm daily. (Barnardos) 0800 WHATS UP (0800 942 8787)
- *Kidsline*  
Kids up to 14 years old can talk with teenage volunteers, who are supervised by adults. Daily after school 4pm–6pm. (Lifeline Aotearoa) 0800 KIDSLINE (0800 543 754)
- *Youthline*  
Confidential youth help and information. For intermediate-aged kids and older. 0800 376 633 Free txt: 234 webchat at [www.youthline.co.nz](http://www.youthline.co.nz)

### ***Victim Support***

0800 842 846 [www.victimsupport.org.nz](http://www.victimsupport.org.nz)

We can support parents and whānau with information, support, and coping tools, and help you find the right local services for your child or young person's needs.

#### CONTACT

#### Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)  
[enquiries@victimsupport.org.nz](mailto:enquiries@victimsupport.org.nz)  
[victimsupport.org.nz](http://victimsupport.org.nz)

