

## Talking with children about a major emergency

How can primary teachers support children when shocking and distressing events appear in the news? There are no easy answers, but understanding, observation and compassion are important. This resource presents guidance for teachers informed by psychosocial practitioners at the British Red Cross. It also includes activities to help children explore their emotions following a traumatic event in the news.

This guidance is for children learning about the attacks indirectly. If they or someone they know were involved and you think they may be experiencing trauma, your local CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) can help.

### How do I talk to children about the recent attacks?

Firstly check how you, the teacher, are feeling. It is best to explore an upsetting subject when you feel you have the capacity. Otherwise you can delay any exploration until you feel ready.

When discussing distressing events with children, respond to questions with simple, low-key explanations, avoiding graphic images that can stick in their minds. You could say, for example, that there was an explosion and that some people died. Other people were hurt and they are now being looked after in hospital. You could add that people are very sad, and they are being supported by their family and friends.

### How can I reassure children when they find out?

You can give children thoughtful reassurance if you think that might be helpful. For instance, you could help children appreciate how events like these are extremely rare, and when they happen there are people around to help. Provided that family members weren't caught up in the attacks, it can be helpful to reassure children that they and their family are safe.

Allow children the opportunity to express themselves and listen to what they say. Make other ways to express feelings available too, such as writing, drawing, music or movement. There are some activity ideas for this below.

### What's a normal response to traumatic news?

Be aware of any changes in children's behaviour following news of a traumatic event. Typical reactions can include rapidly changing emotions, tiredness from nightmares or poor sleep, disturbed eating habits or being afraid to go outside. Other changes could include behavioural outbursts or becoming quiet and withdrawn.

However, it's normal for children to respond in any number of ways. If a child doesn't show any particular sign, they may still be affected and need extra support along with other children.

### Do children in my class need extra support?

Children are remarkably resilient and most will recover on their own. For a few, changes in behaviour might persist. Engage in "watchful waiting", and if you notice the behaviour continuing for a month or more, the child may need extra support.

In the first instance, it might be helpful to talk with the child's parents to see if they have also noticed any changes, and whether there is something else going on outside school. If parents are concerned, they can talk to their GP in the first instance. Your school may also have other resources available, such as access to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) or an educational psychologist.

## Classroom activities

---

The following classroom activities build on the guidance above. They provide practical ways of listening and encouraging pupils to be kind and supportive towards others. They also give opportunities for pupils to begin thinking about their own coping strategies.

### How to help

Explore with the group how they might help someone who is feeling sad and upset. They can imagine a child a bit younger than them who has heard the news and is upset by it. How might the children help them? For younger children, this activity can be done with a bear or other puppet: "Bear is upset. How can we make him feel better?"

Some possible ideas include:

- > Ask the child/bear to say how they are feeling.
- > Ask if there's anything you can do to help them.
- > Ask if they'd like to do something you know they enjoy.
- > Ask if they'd like their favourite toy or something they find comforting.
- > Ask if they'd like to sing a song together.
- > Ask if they'd like to look at a book together.

Encourage responses and write them on the board. There are no right or wrong answers. Use the children's suggestions to create a role-play. In the scene, one or more children can pretend to be upset, and others in the group respond with helpful suggestions. If using a puppet, the bear can respond positively to the children's suggestions, encouraging them to give more.

At the end of the activity, ask the class what they would do if the child/bear was still upset. Which adults could they tell?

As a variation, use musical instruments or sounds in the role-play instead of verbal dialogue. What would the upsetting news sound like? What instrument might represent someone who is upset and another person who wants to help them feel better? How might reading or playing together evolve as a musical ensemble? Discuss and improvise.

### Coping strategies

This activity invites children to explore their own coping strategies.

Explain that you will show them some activities that people do to feel calmer if they are upset or scared about something. Use a whiteboard or other means to present the suggestions one by one. Children should think about each suggestion for a moment or two and then decide on their response. The options could be:

- > Yes, I'll try that.
- > Mmm, that's not for me.
- > I'm not sure.

Agree a way for children to indicate their response, for example by raising their hands or using sticky notes. Then show the activities:

- |                              |                                  |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| > Listen to music.           | > Be with my pet.                |
| > Read a book.               | > Play sport.                    |
| > Watch television.          | > Talk to someone.               |
| > Be with other people.      | > Think about happy experiences. |
| > Have some quiet time.      | > Dance.                         |
| > Play a musical instrument. | > Write.                         |
| > Play a computer game.      | > Draw or paint.                 |
| > Play outside.              |                                  |

What else might work? Invite additions to the list. Keep the ideas in the classroom, as a poster or journal, to remind children of the range of coping strategies available to them.

### Helpful notes

Ask children to complete the following sentence. They should write the full sentence down, for example on a slip of paper or sticky note. Leave some space at the bottom for a response to be added later.

- > When I feel sad, I like to ...

Invite children to write down more than one idea, with each idea on a separate note. They could also finish the following sentence:

- > When I feel anxious or frightened, it helps me to ...

Encourage discussion and pair or group work to get ideas flowing.

Collect the notes. Randomly distribute them among the group, so that children have one they did not write. Now ask them to add a sentence below what has already been written. It should begin:

- > I could help by ...

Share the results at the end of the activity, for example by attaching the notes to a wall or the board. Discuss them as a group, pointing out the range of preferences and the different ways of helping.

*This resource was written by P. J. White of Alt62 and published in May 2017.*