



FORTEM
AUSTRALIA

20 TIPS

HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH TRAUMA

a guide for first responder families

fortemaustralia.org.au



INTRODUCTION

Children can be impacted by a traumatic experience in different ways. It could be through direct exposure to a traumatic incident, witnessing someone they love being harmed, or any kind of meaningful loss.

Each child copes differently in response to a trauma. They may not have the language to express their complex feelings, and so their reactions to stress may not always be obvious.

Children may feel anxious, scared and vulnerable and may not have the ability to process or make sense of an event that is so different from their ordinary experience. This may impact their view of the world and their safety in it.

Healing from a disaster can start in their day-to-day lives. Here are some tips to help parents and caregivers provide support for children and young people through a time of stress.



20 TIPS FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAUMA

- 1 Find a place your child feels safe.** Provide a safe, quiet and comfortable space for your child to discuss and process their experience of the event.
- 2 Provide comfort.** Comfort your child with cuddles and affection, and reassure them that they're safe now.

"Support your child's overall wellbeing through good exercise, sleep and eating habits."



- 3 Keep rules in place.** Children often show challenging behaviour when they're experiencing strong feelings. It's important to stick to your usual rules around what is acceptable behaviour.

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Stick to a normal routine. Try as best as possible to maintain the routine your child had before the event.

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Listen. At the times that your child is ready to talk, listen to them calmly and positively. Get down to their level and make eye contact, to help reassure them.

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Help your child identify and name their feelings. This will help them learn that what they are feeling is normal. By normalising their feelings, it lets the child know that it is okay to talk and feel whatever it is in response to a trauma. For example, “It is okay that you feel angry that our house was damaged and our pet died. I am angry too because I loved her, and I am sad that I can’t see her again”.



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Check in with them. After they've talked to you, check in to see how they're feeling. It takes time for them to process the information they've talked about.

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Seek out the people who can support you and your child with advice, and practical and emotional help.

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Share positive stories. Use past events to help the child understand the current one. For example, if you are talking about a recent bushfire, you could tell your child what happened after the Black Summer bushfires. You could reassure them by focusing on how people coped and worked together to rebuild.

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Acknowledge that it happened. While it's tempting to stop talking about the event, it's helpful to talk about it honestly and thoroughly.

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Get the basics right. Support your child's overall wellbeing through good exercise, sleep and eating habits. This will help them to settle down as they work through their challenges.

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Provide hope for the future. Talk to your child about what they can expect to happen next. For example, “While our house is being rebuilt, we’re going to stay with Grandma. You’ll still be going to your school and seeing your friends.”



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Strengthen the bedtime routine. Sleep problems are common when a child is going through something difficult. Try to keep up a good sleep routine, with plenty of time before bed for winding down.

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Do the things they enjoy. Encourage your child to keep doing the activities they enjoy, and to be around their good friends. This can help to relieve their stress.

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Seek support around you. Seek out the people who can support you and your child. That might include your partner, a good friend, and your child's teacher, who can provide advice and help you both to get through this time with practical and emotional help.

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Be honest. Talk to them with honesty, in an age appropriate way. If you don't know something, it's okay to let your child know that you don't have all the answers. Let them know that you can find out the information they need.

"Encourage your child to keep doing the activities they enjoy."



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Explore books and music together. Reading children's books (both fiction and non-fiction) about survival can help your child to recover and build resilience. Music can also help to increase communication and help them cope.

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Limit exposure to the news. If the trauma your child is going through is in the media, limit their exposure to news outlets. Too much exposure can be overwhelming for your child and may make them feel like the disaster is happening again.

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Allow time for free play. Let your child play alongside yourself or another safe and supportive adult (being mindful not to lead or direct the play). Children sometimes struggle to find the words to express how they feel and may use play to communicate.



Talk to them with honesty, in an age appropriate way.



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Take care of yourself. If you're finding it challenging to support your child or you have experienced the trauma yourself, ask for support. Remember, if you care for yourself, you can better care for others.

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Seek professional support. Many children will bounce back after a trauma. Some will show ongoing distress and may need professional assistance.



SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

There are some warning signs that show your child may not be coping, or has lasting distress. These include:

- ▶ Sleeping difficulties
- ▶ Ongoing aggressive or emotional outbursts
- ▶ Serious problems at school (with their learning, behaviour, concentration, or ability to complete tasks)
- ▶ Preoccupied with the trauma
- ▶ Intense anxiety or emotional difficulties
- ▶ Prolonged nightmares
- ▶ Physical complaints (such as headaches, stomach aches or pains)
- ▶ Isolating or disengaging from people or activities they once enjoyed

IF YOUR CHILD IS SHOWING THESE SIGNS

To help reduce the likelihood of long-standing distress, it is important to reach out to a mental health professional if you notice any of the above signs.

Sometimes it can be helpful to keep a diary of their behaviour for a week or so, to help you get an understanding of what's happening and when.

Make an appointment with your GP and request a referral to a psychologist. They will help make sense of what has happened, and assist your child to cope with thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and experiences related to the trauma.

If any of these signs continue for a couple of weeks or more, and these challenges are interfering with your child's life, it's important to seek help.



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We support first responder families to
proactively look after their wellbeing and
mental fitness

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