



Victim Services of Waterloo Region

Children and Trauma

While trauma can be hard for adults to cope with, it can be especially difficult for children. Children's reactions to trauma will involve not only the impact of the catastrophe on their lives (what they saw, heard, felt, smelled and so on) but also a sense of crisis over their parents' reaction(s).

How Trauma Manifests Itself

Birth – 2 Years:

- High anxiety levels manifested in crying, biting, throwing objects, thumb sucking and agitated behaviour
- While it is unlikely that the child will retain a strong mental memory of the trauma, the child may retain a physical memory

2 Years – 6 Years (Pre-School):

- Children may not have the same level of denial that adults do, so they may take in the catastrophe more swiftly
- May engage in reenactments and play about the traumatic event
- Anxious attachment behaviours are exhibited towards caretakers
- May become mute, withdrawn and/or still
- Manifests in short, but repeated "sadness spans"
- May regress in levels of physical independence
- Sleep disturbances, particularly nightmares, are common
- Any change in daily routines may be seen as threatening
- Does not understand death in its permanency

6 Years – 10 Years (School Age):

- Play continues to be the primary method of expression
- Inability to concentrate in school
- Radical changes in behaviour may result
- May fantasize about even with "savior" ending
- May withdrawal trust from adults
- May become tentative in growth towards independence
- Internal body dysfunctions are normal, such as headaches, stomach aches and dizziness.

Some Coping Strategies for Children

1. Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships. Love and care in the family is a primary need. Extra time should be spent with children to let them know that someone will take care of them and, if parents are survivors, that their parents have reassumed their former role as protector and nurturer is important. Physical closeness is needed.
2. It is important to talk to children about the tragedy – to address the irrationality suddenness of disaster. Children need to be allowed to ventilate their feelings, as do adults, and they have a similar need to have those feelings validated. Reenactments and play about the catastrophe should be encouraged. It may be useful to provide them with special time to paint, draw or write about the event. Adults or older children may help pre-school children to reenact the

event since pre-school children may not be able to imagine alternative “endings” to the disaster and may feel particularly helpless.

3. Parents should be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviours and accept the manifestation of aggression and anger, especially in the early phases after the tragedy.
4. Parents should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event – spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.
5. Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.
6. Since children are often reluctant to initiate conversations about trauma, it may be helpful to ask them what they think other children felt or thought about the event.
7. Reaffirming the future and talking in “hopeful” terms about future events can help a child rebuild trust and faith in their own future, and in the world around them. Often parental despair interferes with a child’s ability to recover.
8. Issues of death should be addressed concretely.

**If you are unsure of what to do,
there are places you can go to for help.**

Information Resources

Child Witness Centre – Kitchener (519) 744-0904
Toll free: 1-888-544-0904

Family and Children’s Services of Waterloo Region
- Cambridge (519) 623-6970
- Kitchener (519) 576-0540

Family Mediation Canada – (519) 585-3118
(Parent/teen mediation)

Just Me & the Kids – (519) 580-3859
(Separation support group)

Kids Help Phone – 1-800-668-6868

Carizon family and Community Services:
(519) 746-5437

Mothers Against Drunk Driving – (519) 896-6233

The Parent Help Line – 1-888-603-9100

People Needing People – (519) 745-2195
(Grief support groups - adults, teens and children)

24 Hour Stress Line – (519) 745-9909

**Victim Services maintains a listing of
counsellors in the Region who
specialize in working with children and teens,
and may have resources specific to your
particular religious or cultural beliefs.
Please call for more information (24 hrs):**

**(519) 585-2363
www.vswr.ca**

The information contained in this fact sheet was obtained from the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), www.trynova.org.



Victim Services of Waterloo Region

North: 45 Columbia St. E. Waterloo, ON
Central: 134 Frederick St. Kitchener, ON
South: 176 Hespeler Rd. Cambridge, ON
Email: victimservices@wrps.on.ca

Phone: 519-585-2363
Phone: 519-650-8500 ext. 4464