

A Guide for Families: Restoring Community Connections

When a community's trust is breached, it is important to take time to restore community connections.

When a child is victimized in a community, it impacts everyone. Noticing how it is affecting your child is important, and the first step to supporting your child is working through your own feelings.

You may be feeling:

- A shaken sense of safety
- Angry
- Overly protective
- A loss of trust
- A lack of control
- A lack of motivation
- A lack of hope
- Scared
- Overwhelmed
- Sad
- Isolated and alone
- Shocked
- Vulnerable
- Grief and loss
- Disbelief

What do you need to do?

Start by learning the facts about the concerns or incident(s) that may have occurred. Accurate information about the situation can help you regain a sense of control over the steps you can take to keep your family safe. If there are community meetings, it can be helpful to attend to find out what you need to know.

Potential impacts on children

We recognize that experiences such as victimization, accidents, death, and/or natural disasters can be traumatic, but we do not always recognize the ways they affect and influence children's and families' everyday lives. They can deeply affect a child's sense of security and self-regulation, but it is important to understand that not all children who experience a traumatic experience are traumatized. The impact on a child is an individual experience.

Alternate formats may be available upon request.

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What your child may be feeling:

- Scared (a generalized fear that something bad might happen to their family; when a child does not understand what has happened, they may make up their own story)
- Angry
- Sad
- Confused
- Ambivalent
- No symptoms or changes in feelings or behaviour

Behaviours you may observe in your child

There is a wide range of behaviours that children who have experienced trauma may exhibit. Children communicate how they are feeling through their behaviour. Pay attention to changes in your child's behaviour that may be signs of distress.

Children under 12:

- Sleeping problems
- Nightmares
- Changes in general behaviour, seems "out of sorts"
- Returns to less mature behaviours (e.g., sucking their thumb, tantrums)
- Is irritable, has outbursts or tantrums, is easily frustrated
- Clinginess
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in school performance
- Anger/aggression towards others
- Isolation or withdrawal from friends, activities, etc.
- Doesn't want to go to school or daycare
- Physical symptoms such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, or chest pain (consult with your child's doctor to make sure they are not related to something else before attributing to distress)
- Generalized fear and anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Forgetfulness

Adolescents:

- Changes in general behaviour, seems "out of sorts"
- Anger/aggression toward others
- Sleeping problems
- General fear and anxiety
- Defiance, particularly toward adults who are the same gender as the offender
- Substance abuse
- Cutting
- Isolation or withdrawal from friends, activities, etc.
- Changes in eating habits
- Extreme changes in the way they dress
- Changes in school performance

For some children, there may be no observable behaviour changes; don't assume they haven't been impacted.

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What your child needs:

- Reassurance that they are safe and protected
- Tolerance for moody behaviour such as clinginess, pushing away, and outbursts
- Help to rebuild a positive sense of self and sense of control over their environment
- Clear expectations, but flexibility and care when rules are broken (gently re-establish boundaries)
- Patience

Getting help

If you notice a change in your child's behaviour or they do not seem quite like themselves, let them know you are there to support them. Listen to how they feel, and reassure them that they are safe and will be okay.

If you have questions and your child seems to be distressed for longer than a few weeks, it is a good idea to consult with your health care practitioner who can connect you with the most appropriate support services.

How to help your child process the situation and move forward

- Spend time with your child to help restore a sense of safety through safe relationships.
- When children are not directly told what has happened and their questions are not answered, they will make up what happened in their mind. The story they make up may be as traumatic, or even more traumatic than the actual event. They begin to believe the story they make up, and react to it as if it were real. Do not overshare information they do not need to know, but pay attention to how they create a beginning, middle, and end to what happened. It is important to ask your child what they believe happened, and keep checking on their perspective throughout the recovery process.
- Engage your child in age-appropriate activities that require movement from both sides of the body. This includes building (e.g., blocks, models, Lego®), art activities, dancing, swimming, basketball, bike riding, walking, and other forms of exercise, and will help them process upsetting or concerning thoughts, feelings, or memories.
- Have your child imagine and discuss or draw a picture of a place where they feel the most safe and relaxed, or a picture of something they really like to do and feel really good at. Have your child post the picture somewhere they will see it regularly.
- Have your child imagine and discuss or draw a picture of something they are looking forward to or excited about. Have your child post it somewhere they will see it regularly.

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