

Helping a child or a young person in a crisis situation

To cope in a crisis, a child needs more care and protection than an adult. A child or a young person lacks the life experience and trust of making it through hard times. This is why the way adults react to the shocking event and offer their support is especially important to them.

The general principles of psychological first aid also apply to helping a child or young person. On this page, you can find information about the ways children and young people typically react to shocking events and tips on how to support a child or young person in a crisis.

How does a child react to crises?

A child understands the situation according to their development level. The smaller the child, the stronger they react to the reactions of adults near them, not the event itself. The ability to understand the experiences of others develops gradually. A small child uses their imagination to fill the gaps in their understanding.

A child has a limited ability to identify and name their needs. This is why the way a child reacts and expresses their emotions can confuse adults. A child can start acting younger than their age, act aggressively or cling to their parent, for example.

A crisis can impact the child's play, school and hobbies as well as their sleeping and eating patterns, activity, concentration or willingness to be with others. A child can also keep themselves occupied doing normal things and let out their distress e.g. by drawing.

How does a young person react to crises?

A young person generally reacts to stressful situations more like an adult. They are already able to experience strong sadness, self-awareness, guilt and shame. A young person may also be unreasonably worried for others or behave in a self-centred manner and feel self-pity.

Crisis situations can cause great changes in the worldview of a young person and make them feel hopeless towards the present day and the future. A shocking event can be evident in a young person's school or studies, hobbies, friendships and ability to concentrate. A young person facing a crisis may take risks, self-harm or act aggressively.

Tips on supporting children of different ages in a crisis situation

1. Supporting a small child in a crisis

- Physical closeness provides security. Cuddle and hug the child.
- Maintain a regular eating and sleeping pattern.
- Talk in a calm and soft voice. Protect the child from loud noises and chaotic situations.

2. Supporting a preschooler or a small schoolchild in a crisis

- Give the child more time and attention than usually.
- Maintain regular routines and schedules.
- Preschoolers and older children may use their imagination to fill the events. If needed, explain to the child that the bad events are not their fault.
- Give the child a chance to play and relax.
- Offer them information about the event according to their development level, but avoid details that can scare the child.
- Keep the child near you if they are afraid or want to cling to you.
- Remind the child frequently that they are safe.
- Stay patient even if the child regresses to a level of a younger child and starts to suck their thumb or suffer from bedwetting.

3. Supporting an older child or young person in a crisis

Young people look for support at home, but also from their friends and online. A young person can quickly find information and peer experiences of similar situations from other young people online or in social media.

As an adult, you are easily left out of the young person's own social circles. However, your presence is important: as a safe adult you can help the young person process discussions with other young people and provide background to claims and information found on social media.

Although a young person may not necessarily want to talk about the situation with you straight away, be present and available.

- Give the young person more time and attention than usually.
- Help the young person maintain regular routines, e.g. sleeping and eating patterns.
- Offer information about the event and explain what is going on currently.
- Let the young person be sad. Do not expect them to stay strong. Accept their emotions without judging.
- Listen when a young person talks about their thoughts and fears. It can be easier to start a discussion alongside doing something else – e.g. housework, exercising, the sauna or a car trip can provide a natural environment for talking.
- Together with the young person, set clear rules and expectations for everyday life.
- Find appropriate opportunities for the young person to help and be of use to others.