*Helping Children Deal With Difficult Events*

Difficult events are upsetting to everyone involved. Children, older people, and/or people

with disabilities are especially at risk. For a child, his or her view of the world as a safe and predictable place is temporarily lost. Children become afraid that the event will happen again and that they or their family will be effected. The feelings created by the situation can be challenging for a child to deal with.

How a parent or other adult reacts to a child following any difficult event can help children recover more quickly and more completely. This general information can help you in this task.

**Children s Reactions**

Children’s fear and anxiety are very real, even though to adults they may seem exaggerated. Children are afraid of what is strange. They can fear being left alone or they may begin acting younger than the age they are.

Behaviours that were common at an earlier age, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, clinging to parents or fear of strangers, may reappear. Older children who have shown some independence may want to spend more time with their families. Bedtime problems may appear. A child may begin to have night-mares; not want to sleep alone; and/or become afraid of the dark, falling asleep or remaining asleep.

Some children will show their fear by developing physical symptoms, such as Stomach aches, headaches or feeling “sick.” All children can experience thinking difficulties. They can become easily distracted, feel confused and disoriented and find it hard to concentrate.

**HOW TO HELP CHILDREN**

**In the Family**

**Routines.** Children of all ages can benefit from the family keeping their usual routines - meals, activities, and bedtimes - as close to normal as possible. This allows a child to feel more secure and in control. As much as possible, children should stay with people with whom they feel most familiar.

**Special needs.** Accept the special needs of children by allowing them to be more dependent on you for a period of time. Give more hugs if they need them; let them keep the light on at night or not sleep alone or return to having their favourite teddy bear or blanket; don’t mind their clinging behaviour.

**Feelings and reactions.** Children express their feelings and reactions in different ways. Your acceptance of this will make a difference to how your child recovers from the trauma. This means accepting that some children will react by becoming withdrawn and unable to talk about the event, while others will feel intensely sad and angry at times and at other times will act as if the incident never happened. Children are often confused about what has happened and about their feelings.

**Talking about what happened.**

• Listen to and accept children's feelings.

• Give honest, simple, brief answers to their questions.

• Make sure they understand your answers and the meaning you intend.

• Use words or phrases that won't confuse a child or make the world more frightening.

• Give your child an honest explanation if you are feeling so upset you don’t want to talk about what happened. You may want to take "time out" and ask a trusted family friend to help.

• If children keep asking the same question over and over again it is because they

are trying to understand; trying to make sense out of the disruption and

confusion in their world. Repeated inquiries are because they expect everything to

return to normal.

• If the child feels guilty, ask him or her to explain what happened. Listen

carefully to whether he or she attaches a sense of responsibility to some part of

the description. Explain the facts of the situation and emphasize that no one,

least of all the child, could have prevented it.

• Let the school help. The child's teacher can be sensitive to changes in the

child's behaviour and will be able to respond in a helpful way.

• You can reassure your child by saying, "The event is over. Now we’ll do everything possible to stay safe, and together we can help get things back to normal."

• Notice when children have questions and want to talk.

• Be especially loving and supportive; children need you at this time.

**WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

Children are amazingly flexible, even though they can be deeply affected by difficult events or losses. Sometimes a child can be helped by a counsellor who can provide a safe place to talk about what happened and their feelings. Getting professional help is a good idea if a child shows any of the following changes for longer than three months following the trauma:

• Behaviour or academic problems at school.

• Angry outbursts.

• Withdrawal from usual social activities or play with other children.

• Frequent nightmares or other sleep disturbances.

• Physical problems such as nausea, headaches, weight gain or loss.

• Intense anxiety or avoidance behaviour that is triggered by reminders of the

 event.

• Depression or a sense of hopelessness about life or the future.

• Dangerous risk-taking behaviour.

• Continued worry about the event as a primary focus in life.

N.B. Certain situations may make a child more vulnerable to having difficulty. If a

child has experienced a recent loss such as a divorce, a death of someone who was

close, or a move to a new neighbourhood, he or she may feel particularly

overwhelmed by the difficult event.