

Dealing with a Crisis

It was wonderful to have some warm weather recently, but for some the smell of bushfires, can invoke feelings of dread, empathy and familiarity. It reminds us that we are not immune to disaster, and highlights for us how important it is to know both how to cope when memories and feelings are stirred, and also to be prepared to manage when a crisis occurs.

Crises can come from many different directions or forms and impact our families, especially our children, in different ways. By its very definition 'crisis' means something unexpected, something outside our normal expectations and something for which we were most likely not prepared. Crises usually involve change and often involve loss.

Yes, we do experience bushfires and floods in Tasmania, but a crisis may also be the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one, even a pet. It may be the loss of the family home through unforeseeable circumstances (fire or financial). It may be circumstances within the family i.e. job loss, a drug addiction, diagnosis of a terminal illness, accident, marriage breakup, or incarceration of a family member. Working with children at our school we have dealt with all of these issues and know that no-one is immune. Dealing effectively and appropriately with a crisis when it occurs is the best way to protect you and your children from potential lifelong effects should an unfortunate event strike.

Being prepared is the best tool we have. The occurrence of a crisis in a family is hard for everyone, but particularly the parent, who, whilst wanting to guard and protect their children, may feel at a loss, out of control, powerless, guilty or even unable to cope themselves. Crises can also evoke an emotional response; fear, anxiety, anger or grief.

So what to do?

For our children:-

The most important thing for children is to feel safe and to know that there is someone who is looking out for them and on whom they can rely. Children will look to their significant adults to see how they are coping and take their lead from them.

Try not to over react. If you panic, your children will be more afraid. If something has happened suddenly and you are feeling very emotional, try to calm down before you talk to them.

If there has been an unexpected incident, take charge if you need to. This will help your children to feel safe. Tell them 'You're safe now. I'll look after you. Don't worry I'm here. I won't let anything (else) bad happen to you.'

Tell them what's happening. In the absence of useful information, children will make up the details themselves and little imaginations can be worse than the facts. Often we are asked, "How much information should I give?" Our answer is always the same. Tell the truth. You don't want to have to go back on what you've said and lose credibility at any time and especially not in a crisis. Children will let you know when

they know enough because they will stop asking questions, so start with a simple factual answer. For example, “Daddy’s been in a car accident. He’s been hurt but he’s in hospital now and the doctors are looking after him. He won’t be coming home tonight. Nanna’s going to look after you this afternoon while I go and visit him and find out how soon you can come too. ”

It’s not helpful to say, “There’s been a terrible accident. Your father was hit by a truck and was nearly killed, and another lady died. I am so upset and worried about him. I have to rush and see him right now. Children are not allowed in the intensive care unit so you can’t come. I don’t know what we are going to do if he can’t go back to work.....blah, blah, blah.” We hope you are getting the picture. Don’t give them details they don’t need. And don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.”

If children want more information, they will ask. Answer as simply as you can to provide the next piece of information. Use language they will understand and avoid euphemisms when talking to small children. It is better to say that someone has “died”, rather than passed away, or “gone to be with Granny”. Be prepared to repeat the information more than once.

It’s Ok for your children to see you upset, but let them see you managing your feelings. Let them know you’ll be alright (if you think this is true). Let them know that you don’t expect them to look after you or to solve the problem.

Help children to have contact with other supportive family members or friends.

Allow time and space for children to express their feelings. They might like to draw or write or tell stories. If they are feeling angry or aggressive, some energetic play might help. Be patient if their behaviour is difficult.

Depending what has happened, like you, they might like to do something to help; write a letter or bake a cake, or donate some of their pocket money or toys. Facilitate this if you can.

Spend some extra time with children when you put them to bed at night. Remind them that they’re loved, that you’re not going anywhere and that they’re safe (now). A night light might help if they’re afraid.

Limit children’s watching of disasters on TV. If they do watch, be there. Be available to talk about what they are seeing. Remember children don’t necessarily understand that the event isn’t occurring all over again if they see it on the television. Even if they do, they can be re-traumatised, and referring to our earlier point, it might be giving them more information than they need.

Be sure that children are still allowed to be children; to laugh and play (even if there has been a very sad event or loss), and make sure they eat well, are active and get plenty of rest.

Let school know what is going on so they can look out for your child and monitor changes in mood or behaviour.

And you, the parents?

Recognise your feelings. Accept that emotional responses are very normal in times of crisis or stress. Find a way to express them. Talk to a supportive friend or family member, write them down. Talk to a counsellor if you're finding your feelings difficult to express or manage. Allow yourself to be sad, and allow yourself time to heal.

Remember that anniversaries can trigger old hurts and emotions so plan ahead for these. Think about how you will cope and be kind to each other and make allowances.

Respect that people deal with crises differently. Have no expectations about how someone else should react.

Make time to relax and look after yourself; most especially if you are the carer.

Finally, stick to routine as much as possible. It is helpful for you and for children in feeling safe and manageable.

Next newsletter we will write about how you might recognise that your child is experiencing a crisis and how to help older children cope.

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