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# How can I help my child 0-12 years?

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VICTORIA • COUNSELLING, SUPPORTING & EDUCATING

## How can I help my child?

The whole family, including bereaved and traumatised children, are affected when a family member (or members) are involved in or witness to a roadside trauma event such as a serious or fatal collision. Understandably they and you can respond in various ways. Here are some things you might notice and suggestions to help you and your family as you process the event.

## Self-care for grown-ups

The best way to help your child is to help yourself. You are your child's first and most important trauma resource. Finding support to talk through parenting issues and discuss your reactions and responses is important for your recovery and healing and of immense benefit to your child.

## Children aged 0-5

Common reactions:

- Being fussy, irritable, clingy and harder to calm down
- Disturbed sleep
- Temporary or prolonged regression in behaviour and development
- Increased aggression or powerful play

## What can help?

- Reassure children they are safe and much-loved
- Invite children to talk freely about their worries and questions
- Tell the facts in an age-appropriate way
- Answer questions truthfully
- Reassure them they are not to blame for the event

- Reassure children that things will be fine 'after a while'
- Maintain aspects of the child's routine
- Be ready to be involved in play with young children to provide opportunities to let you know about their worries and be a starting point for further conversations
- Redirect any aggression towards 'powerful play' such as superhero play or energetic games

## Children aged 5-12

Common reactions:

- Loss of confidence
- Hides their feelings to protect their parent or carer
- Concern about who will care for them if the other parent/carer dies or is hurt
- Physical reactions such as stomach aches or headaches
- Temporary or prolonged regression in development and behaviour
- Acting out both inside the home and outside the home

## What can help?

- Speak with your child when **you** are feeling okay
- Reassure them they are safe and will be cared for
- Invite children to talk to you about their thoughts, concerns and imagination
- Answer questions simply and directly. Don't be afraid to say, "I'll need to think about that for a while"
- Reassure your child that sadness, anger and fear are normal reactions and will change
- Engage together in activities you both enjoy such as reading together (consider books about death and trauma that can be read with children)

- Draw or write about the event to assist your child in developing their own words to describe their thoughts and feelings
- Show your child that it is ok to express these feelings in a safe way e.g. "I am feeling sad right now"
- Allow time and space for play as children can use this time to make sense of what has happened
- Inform caregivers in your children's life of the event e.g. teachers, grandparents, afterschool care service providers and so on

## What is helpful to understand

Children are learning about the world so their understanding of death is still developing. By the age of around eight, many children's understanding of death almost matches an adult's but knowledge gaps still exist. It can be helpful for the child's parents and carers to look out for misunderstandings and discuss them as they arise.

Adults understand five things about death that children may still be learning:

1. Everyone dies
2. Death is final (people can't return to be with us in the same way)
3. Bodies stop functioning after death (people don't feel anything after death)
4. Causes of death (people die from physical causes)
5. Particular beliefs about life after death including spiritual and religious beliefs

Making open and private spaces to invite and discuss difficult questions about death is the most important way to support a grieving child. In this safe place and time, you may like to ask your child "Do you have any questions about what has happened? It is ok to ask another adult or me about it."

## **Children learning about death may ask these questions**

- Does one death lead to another?
- Will I lose other people I love?
- Am I in danger of dying?
- Did I do something to cause the death?
- Will my surviving parent die?
- Is the dead person scared, cold or hungry?
- When will they come home?
- I was the last person who touched the person so did I cause their death?

## **Children with additional needs**

Children with additional needs may have similar or distinctive individual response at times to grief and loss. Lean into your children's existing supports such as an occupational therapist, psychologist or other specialist to consider the impact this experience places on your child's functioning and wellbeing. This doesn't need to happen straight away but can be helpful in managing any challenges that arise.

## When to seek further help for your child

Signs that your child may need some additional support include:

- Repetitive grief behaviours which last more than a few months
- Enduring physical symptoms
- Harm to self or others
- Signs of depression such as no longer caring about anything, no energy for any activities in their life
- Withdrawal or frequent crying.

Sources of help include:

- Your general practitioner
- Private psychologists, counsellors and social workers
- School wellbeing staff
- Road Trauma Support Services Victoria by providing counselling for your child and making appropriate referrals.

To confidentially discuss any of the issues raised within this brochure, please call Road Trauma Support Services Victoria on **1300 367 797**.

## Our counsellors

Our counsellors are specially trained to help people manage the thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with road trauma.

Counselling sessions are free of charge, confidential and unlimited in number for anyone affected by a collision on the roads (or involving any public transport), whenever this may have occurred. Sessions may be conducted face-to-face or by telephone.

Our clients include bereaved families, friends and colleagues; injured people and carers; drivers and passengers; and people who were first on scene – witnesses, citizens who offered assistance, and emergency service workers.

You do not need a referral to access our services. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. To make an appointment, please call **1300 367 797**.

## Our organisation

Road Trauma Support Services Victoria provides free counselling, information and peer support programs to more than 3,000 Victorians impacted by road trauma every year.

We are committed to educating the community and raising public awareness about road trauma and how it affects people's lives. We do this by addressing the attitudes and behaviours of road users through education.

## Our community

Here are some ways to help and connect with people affected by road trauma:

- Tell your family and friends about the free counselling services at Road Trauma Support Services Victoria
- Like us on Facebook, follow us on Instagram and Twitter, or join our mailing list
- Join us at our annual Shine a Light on Road Safety community walk or Time for Remembering ceremony
- Come along to our free monthly Art Therapy Group (no art/craft experience necessary)
- Get involved in shaping our future by becoming a member of Road Trauma Support Services Victoria
- Volunteer with us

## Support our work

The trauma that results from a fatal or serious collision can happen to anyone at any time. Each dollar donated helps us to provide vital services to all Victorians who are impacted. Please consider making a donation today.

We reinvest all funds in our programs and work hard to make sure that the resources entrusted to us are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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