

ADVICE & GUIDANCE

Supporting a child's resilience at a time of crisis

At approximately 10.30pm on Monday 22 May 2017, the lives of many families were changed forever. 22 people lost their lives and a similar number are currently being cared for in hospital and are being treated for life-threatening injuries. The images and memory of Monday night's events in Manchester will live with the survivors for the rest of their lives and many of the surviving children will rely on those around them, parents / carers / school leaders and staff, to provide support at this difficult time.

Such events have taught experts how to guide those caring for children, to be prepared to respond to crises in ways that help their children to be resilient. The following is an outline of the support that responsible adults can provide for their own children, or for children in their care.

Listening is an important way for parents / carers to express love and acceptance. In the context of crises, carers of children should look for clues from them about what they know, how they interpret events and what they need from those around them. Ask children what they understand about what has happened and what questions or concerns they have. Listen for any potential misunderstandings. It's common for children to have fears based on limited information or from not understanding what they were told about the event. You must first listen to their concerns so that you can frame your discussion and protect them from any unnecessary and unsavory details. When they finish talking, ask them how they are doing, and how you can be helpful to them.

Helping children express their fears and worries and communicate what they're feeling may be achieved simply by sitting with children while they draw a picture, play with their toys or use story-telling.

Young children

Young children may need your help to find the words to express what they are feeling. Offer them words to choose from by telling them it's normal to feel sad, upset or confused. Share how you are feeling and explain what you're doing to help yourself feel better.

Older children and adolescents

Older children and adolescents might find it easier to talk about what their friends think. If this is the case, talk about what their friends must be feeling and how it is understandable. Ask your child what their friend's parents / carers could do to make them more secure. Encourage older children to ask questions and share feelings. Don't undermine or belittle their emotions.

Some children will act as if they aren't bothered at all. If this is the case, there's no reason to push them to express anything at this time. Simply tell them you're there to listen. Your child may be deeply moved or upset but actually needs a sense of normality. Suggest that your own way of gaining comfort is by talking about the situation. Leave the door open for future conversations – they may happen at any time.

What to say

Adults must be honest about what has happened. Sadly, this is not the kind of truth that we can protect children from. **Young children** will need simple explanations of what happened and how it affects them. If they have completely misunderstood the sequence of events, it's best to gently correct them. But if they explain the story in a way that implies – *"it's all over and all the bad people have gone away"* – try not to correct them or embellish their version of events. The children's explanations may be exactly what they need to believe to feel safe. Don't take away that sense of security they're constructing for themselves.

Older children and adolescents will probably ask for and benefit from additional information about the events and recovery efforts.

Saying you don't know is OK

It's OK to say you don't know why something terrible has happened.

Reinforce that your child is safe

Reinforce that you and your children are safe – underline what steps you have taken to be and to remain safe. Emphasise that the police, service personnel and rescue workers are working around the clock to make things safe for their family, their school and their community.

Restoring balance

Get back to old routines as soon as reasonably possible because they provide comfort and a familiar structure to a child's daily life – for example, getting back to school and regular social events. Changes in a child's behaviour may be as a result of fears or insecurities that can be alleviated through reassurance and attention. It's OK to let your children be more dependent on you following a traumatic event. Children may be more distracted and have trouble concentrating on schoolwork. If you can, provide extra help. Children may become more anxious when separating from parents at bedtime, when they leave for work or an appointment. Give yourself extra time to talk to your children before separating from them. Remember that your child's world revolves around parents, carers, their home and their school. Any disruption to these may hit your children hard. It's therefore important to minimise any disruption in these areas.

Finding ways to help others will help children recover sooner because it creates a sense of control over a tragedy that often makes them feel helpless and therefore helps children feel better about themselves.

Limiting children's exposure to the media is recommended as over-exposure may change the way that children view the world – they may begin to perceive the world as a permanently scary and threatening place.

Remember...

Children rely on carers heavily to try and comprehend and interpret traumatic events and we need to be aware of the different ways they learn from us. The support we offer can help buffer the potential negative consequences of experiencing trauma.

The bottom line for parents is to remain calm and to remind children that you are doing everything you can to keep them safe. Feeling secure and connected to parents, family members, teachers, friends and community are the greatest protections children have.

Further information, advice and guidance for NAHT members and carers

Manchester Evening News: How to talk to children about the Manchester bomb attacks

Members may wish to take a look at additional guidance provided by Lucy Lovell

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/manchester-terror-attack-bomb-children--13080812>

Bomb threats

Members may also wish to take a look at our guidance which can be found here:

<http://www.naht.org.uk/welcome/advice/advice-home/accountability-and-community-advice/bomb-threat-guidance/>

Exams

Schools affected by the events should contact the relevant exam boards. Students affected should speak to their teachers.

The special consideration process for pupils and further guidance is available from the JCQ, as well as from the exam boards: <https://www.jcq.org.uk/Download/exams-office/access-arrangements-and-special-consideration/regulations-and-guidance/a-guide-to-the-special-consideration-process-2016-2017>. The applications deadline is 6 July, for GCSEs, AS and A levels.

School trips (especially to London and other major cities)

Our advice is as follows:

- Schools should continue with their travel and visit plans
- Schools should check with event organisers in advance
- Schools should allow extra time for additional security checks
- The British Transport Police's security campaign "See it. Say it. Sorted" can support school trip leaders in the event that trips are taken by rail / coach and can be found here:

http://www.btp.police.uk/latest_news/see_it_say_it_sorted_new_natio.aspx