



Young People and Disasters

This leaflet has been written by members of Disaster Action (DA), all of whom are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. Some of the disasters we have been affected by have involved many young people and children, such as Aberfan, the *Jupiter* cruise ship sinking and Dunblane.

Most disasters will involve children and young people to a greater or lesser extent depending on the circumstances. Their particular individual needs should be taken into account as part of the humanitarian response.

This leaflet contains links to resources that should enable adults to support young people as well as to resources written for young people themselves.

The immediate aftermath

A disaster takes away the sense that we are in control of our lives. The feeling of disempowerment that can follow may feel especially bewildering for children if the adults around them are – through good intention – trying to make decisions on their behalf. Involving children in decisions on whether to visit a disaster site, for example, may seem too difficult for those caught up in the trauma. However, they should not be excluded, and should be given the same opportunities as adults to make informed choices.

Children and young people should be encouraged to speak about what has happened, if they wish to, but without being forced to do so. Providing children, in particular, with as 'normal' and ordinary a routine as possible can feel particularly difficult at a time when adults around young people are finding it hard to cope with a trauma themselves, but this may also help.

Police family liaison officers may be working with families where there are children and young people. Their role and purpose with the family should be explained in ways appropriate to the young person's level of understanding. Given the intense pressure and emotional strain in the aftermath of disaster, it is likely that such information will need to be repeated. Each person is unique and should be treated as such, without being judged.

Seeking appropriately qualified advice and support If the disaster involves children and young people in particular, certain agencies may be directly involved in offering practical and emotional support. These may include, for example, school-based personnel and educational psychologists. Some organisations are more experienced than others in responding to traumatic incidents and specialise in addressing the needs of children and young people at this time. A list of some of these organisations is set out below.

Trust and confidentiality

A disaster often makes adults question the world in which they live and the same is likely to be true for children and young people. Their sense of security may have taken a heavy blow. Restoring their trust in the world may be difficult and it is essential that those around them are 'super-trustworthy'. Children may be embarrassed about how they feel, so they need to know that they can speak to adults in confidence; at the same time, adults around young people

should be aware that there may be circumstances in which such confidentiality can be broken, for example if they believe a young person's welfare is at risk.

Longer-term aftermath

Adults affected by disaster respond in different ways. Some seem to cope well at the outset and then react badly later on; others have the opposite reaction. There is no right or wrong way to recover and deal with the experience as time passes. This will also be true for children and young people. It is important for young people to feel that they have 'permission' to talk about their feelings even some considerable time after the event; they should be made aware of how to get help if they need it.

Useful Links

Some of the links below are for adults helping children and young people through trauma and bereavement; others are for young people themselves.

Assist Trauma Support Care

Assist have a specialist psychologist experienced in working with children following trauma.
<http://www.assisttraumacare.org.uk/>

Child Bereavement Charity (CBC)

CBC has a dedicated forum for young people to discuss issues around bereavement.
http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/for_young_people

Children and Disasters

This website is from the American Academy of Pediatrics.
<http://www.aap.org/disasters/index.cfm>

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse offers relevant support resources - see the first link below. The second link is to resources for children.

<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/Children.html>
<http://www.cruse-tees-valley.org.uk/children.htm>

Dealing with Traumatic Bereavement (Northern Ireland health services)

This document contains information on identifying and meeting the needs of young people.
http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/pdf/Dealing_with_Traumatic_Bereavement.pdf

Coping with Trauma – Great Ormond Street Hospital

http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/gosh_families/information_sheets/traumatic_stress/traumatic_stress_children.pdf

Grief Encounter

This charity works to raise understanding of children's needs following bereavement.
<http://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

Health talk online

http://www.healthtalkonline.org/Living_with_dying/Bereavement_due_to_traumatic_death/Topic/3708/

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

This is a US network, whose aim is to raise the standard of care and improve access to services for traumatized children and their families throughout the United States.

<http://www.nctsn.org/>

Books

Jupiter's Children (Mary Campion, Liverpool University Press, 1998)

Mary Campion, a teacher leading a school cruise trip on the *Jupiter* which sank off Athens in October 1988, compiled this book from the first person accounts of those affected, including teenagers who survived the disaster.

Literature and Best Practice Review and Assessment: Identifying People's Needs in Major Emergencies and Best Practice in Humanitarian Response (Dr Anne Eyre, Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2006). See pages 18-19, which refer to the needs of children and young people following disasters.

http://interim.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/132790/ha_literature_review.pdf

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