

Young People and Disasters

This leaflet has been written by members of Disaster Action, who are all survivors and bereaved people of 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.

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

This guide 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 follows 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 be given the opportunities as adults to make informed choices to prevent them from feeling excluded.

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 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 often intense pressure and emotional strain in the aftermath of disaster, such information will probably 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 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 – see 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 recover 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 the case for children and young people. It is important for them 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.

Disaster Action would like to thank all those who contributed to the preparation of this leaflet, both within and outside the organisation.

Useful links and resources

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Assist Trauma Care

If you or a member of your family have been affected by a trauma as a result of a disaster and would like to discuss whether therapy from ASSIST can help you, please telephone **01788 551919** or Email admin@assisttraumacare.org.uk.

<http://assisttraumacare.org.uk>

Child Bereavement UK (CBUK)

CBUK supports families when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. They have a dedicated page on their website for young people.

Telephone: 0800 02 888 40

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Cruse - Bereavement Care (Child Support)

Cruse offers support resources for adults responding to the needs of bereaved children, and also includes Hope Again - <http://hopeagain.org.uk> - a website designed for young people by young people.

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

<http://www.cruse.org.uk/bereavement-services/children>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

This US website includes helpful information about types of childhood trauma, therapies and resources

<http://www.nctsn.org>

Further Information

Dealing with Traumatic Bereavement

A guide produced in Northern Ireland providing information for those supporting people who have experienced a traumatic bereavement.

http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/pdf/Dealing_with_Traumatic_Bereavement.pdf

Books

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

Mary Campion, a teacher leading a school cruise trip on the *Jupiter* that sank off Athens in October 1954, 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 (Independent report commissioned by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2007, pages 18-19, which refer to the needs of children and young people following disasters.

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