

Indigenous Parents and Carers: How might trauma, loss and grief affect your bub?



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What is trauma?

We can consider trauma to be a happening, event, or series of events, that your child has been involved in or witnessed. It is a traumatic event if it has been upsetting or shocking or de-stabilising to your child.

This traumatic experience can be a result of a major event, like a bushfire, or floods, or it can be the result of something like bullying, or domestic violence.

What is loss and grief?

Loss is when something ends (you or your child has 'lost' something or someone), and it can mean the death of a family member or friend, or member of the community. It can mean the loss of a pet, or a relationship (eg divorce or separation).

It can be psychological loss as well, such as the loss associated with natural disasters – the loss of feeling safe (eg with earthquakes, the loss of feeling safe on solid ground).

Grief is the emotional response to these types of losses. This is normal. Grief, and how you work through these emotions, is a normal process.

However, if these emotions and feelings continue for any length of time, then your child (or you) may need extra support to resolve their feelings.

How might this affect your children?

There are long term and short term effects of trauma and loss and grief.

It is normal for a child to be 'shaken' by an event. You would expect them to react, and to be sad or upset or frightened. They need to be consoled and reassured that things will be OK.

If they remain upset, or are acting differently, then they may need help getting through the process.

Kids are like sponges, they can tell when something is up around them, and they can pick up on the vibe of the home.

You need to be mindful of what is being said around them, but also about the things that aren't said but can impact them:

- Things like fighting and violence around them, and raised voices.
- A lack of touch and nurturing (even a lack of attention).
- An unsafe environment (eg untrusted people in the house).

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Your kids may feel like some of the things happening around them are OK or normal.

Because of what may be happening around them, your child may think violence (including yelling and abuse) is normal. This can have an impact on them now and in the future, especially with future relationships.

How can you tell (if this is affecting your kids)?

- Sleep changes. Are they having nightmares?
- Does your child now have a lack of appetite?
- 'Acting out'.
- Not wanting to be alone.
- Your child not seeming to ever relax. Your child may be more anxious than usual.
- A lack of 'self regulation' – where they can't seem to calm themselves or distract themselves from crying or screaming or 'acting out'.

Some of these questions may help you decide if your child needs help:

- » Has your child gone back to past behaviours?
- » Have they 'regressed' to what they were like at a younger age?
- » Are they drawing or writing of the event, or of disturbing images? Is this a pattern?
- » Is your child more negative than they usually are?
- » Is your child now being bullied, or are they now bullying other children?

What can you do?

Try to keep a routine. Your bub needs something they can rely on and some things they can 'count on'.

Soothe them if they are upset. Give them a hug, a cuddle.

Reassure them (by words and actions) that they are safe now, and that they are loved.

Let your kids cry, let them express their emotion.

Try to 'model' good skills for them. Sometimes it is easy to want to hide your grief from them, but children learn through how their loved ones cope. You can model good coping to your child.

Try to give them happy, positive experiences to balance the bad stuff.

Who can you contact? Who can help?

The important thing is that you talk to someone about it, and that you know that you can ask for help.

This is not an exhaustive list. It is just some suggestions for support:

- Your local AMS (Aboriginal Medical Service).
- Your family doctor (also, your doctor can refer you to a psychologist if you want, and it will be covered on Medicare).
- The school counsellor.
- The local community health centre.
- The Aboriginal liaison officer at your kid's school.
- Trusted family and Elders.
- Good friends, so you can get the support you need as well.
- Services like Lifeline, or Kids Helpline.