

Helping your child cope after an accident



Written by Belinda Dow

Accidents are unexpected events that often result in injury such as a car accident, sporting accident, fall, burn injury or animal attack. Accidents can have physical consequences for children that range from mild and temporary to severe and long-term depending on the nature of the accident. Children may also be exposed to unfamiliar and unpleasant aspects of medical care following an accident, such as hospitalisation, surgery, needles, catheters and so on. Sometimes, children are also faced with ongoing difficulties, such as coping with the injury or death of someone else in the same accident, or ongoing health problems and rehabilitation.

It is no wonder that accidents can also have emotional and psychological consequences for children (and parents). Accidents can be frightening for children, and it is important to remember that children might feel and act very differently to adults after stressful events. While most children cope well after an accident, others may take more time to adjust. Every child, and every accident, is different.

Common responses

Some common responses that your child may have include:

- » Emotional changes: sad, anxious, worried, irritable, quiet and withdrawn
- » Physical changes: jumpy, sleep troubles, fast beating heart, headaches, feeling sick

- » Changes in thinking: difficulty concentrating, struggling with everyday life
- » Social changes: not wanting to be around other people or not wanting to be alone
- » Changes in behaviour: not wanting to talk about the accident, losing interest in their usual activities, wetting themselves, wanting to sleep in your room, acting younger, doing risky things, having angry outbursts, misbehaving, getting in trouble at school
- » Positive changes: increased confidence and self-esteem, closer relationship with friends and family

How long will this last?

- » Most children cope very well and move on quickly
- » Some children are distressed at first, but gradually adjust over the next few months (especially younger children)
- » Some children experience distress that persists for a long time
- » Some children cope well at first, but become distressed later on

What can I do to help my child?

Getting back to usual routines after an accident is very reassuring for children and sends the message that everything is okay now and back to normal.

- » Encourage your child to participate in their usual activities, including house rules and leisure activities
- » Try not to be too over-protective – this can send a

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message to your child that they are still in danger

- » Try not to give your child too much special treatment. Set realistic rules and expectations of their behaviour

Talking about the accident

It's okay to talk with your child about their accident and their feelings, although it is important to think carefully about how you discuss it.

Some helpful tips for talking about the accident:

- » It is usually better to talk about the accident than to avoid it
- » Be a role model, and stay calm and matter-of-fact when talking about it
- » Answer your child's questions simply and honestly. Check if there is anything else they want to know or any other issues that are worrying them about the accident
- » Stick to the facts, and correct any misunderstandings that your child has about what happened
- » Make it clear to your child that the accident happened in the past, and that they are safe now
- » Remind them of positive things that have resulted from the accident (e.g. friends and teachers helping them)
- » Praise them often for positive things they have done since the accident (e.g. how well they can handle stressful situations)
- » As a role model, talk about some strategies that you use when you are feeling stressed
- » Try to finish the conversations with a focus on how they are safe and getting on with life

Some things to avoid when talking about the accident:

- » Try to avoid forcing your child to talk about the accident if they don't want to. Speaking openly and matter-of-factly with other family members in front of your child is a good opportunity to be a

role-model

- » Try to avoid talking about things that make your child feel frightened. (e.g. try not to discuss your fears that they would die, be scarred or never walk again)
- » Try to avoid discussing the "what if's." Stick to the facts.

Looking after yourself

Parents sometimes feel distressed after their child's accident, too. You are better prepared to help your child if you pay attention to your own feelings and reactions and take positive steps to care for yourself.

- » Seek support from friends, family or professionals
- » Take some time out to relax - read a book, spend time with friends, take a bath, watch a movie
- » Maintain a healthy diet and regular exercise routine to battle stress and anxiety
- » Look after your sleep and relationships

When to get help

- » If you are having trouble with your sleep, or if you have fears or anxiety that continue beyond the early period after the accident
- » If you are having difficulties with work commitments or family relationships that weren't present before the accident
- » If your feelings are making it hard to talk about what happened and answer your child's questions
- » If health problems are worrying you

Such help can be provided from you local family/ doctor/GP or other mental health professional who can assess your problems and provide treatment or refer you to someone who can help.

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