

Terror & Trauma

AND THE ROLE OF THE NURSERY

The Westminster terrorist attack was a reminder that horrific things can happen at any time. Would your nursery and out-of-school provision be prepared for the worst? Are you confident about supporting children when they are worried or anxious?

Children look to adults to help them to make sense of the world.

And nursery staff can be children's closest grown-up allies after their families. So when there are frightening events in the media – terrorism, natural disasters, kidnappings, children missing, murder or abuse – children will turn to the adults around them for reassurance.

Even if children are shielded from television and other media relaying alarming events, news will be talked about in playgrounds and dining rooms, especially among any older, school-age children in your care.

It's better that children are armed with facts than exaggerated second or third-hand versions from their friends, or when they have tried to piece together what may or may not be going on from a

snippet of radio coverage or something they saw on a parent's phone.

Adults have a responsibility to restore children's sense of security. It's important to explain to them that though there are some scary things in the world, they are in a safe place.

Even if a child doesn't mention bad news, don't assume they are not troubled by it.

They may be worrying quietly inside.

NDNA's Lead Early Years Adviser, Jo Baranek, said: "It's very difficult in these days of 24-hour media from all angles to prevent children from seeing distressing coverage and trying to pretend that nothing bad ever happens can be unhelpful."

Nicky Cox MBE, Editor-in-Chief of children's newspaper First News, suggested: "Explain simply what has happened, taking care not to use

sensationalised words that tend to be used by the national press.

"Remind them that there is much more good news than bad news happening and that there are many more good people than bad people."

It's vital that they know they are safe and that events like the recent one in London don't happen very often at all – which is why they are in the news – and that five people died but there were eight million people in London at the time.

Remind children that the best way to stay safe is to take care in their own daily lives.

Children are more likely to have an accident in their own home than when they are out and about.

A child doesn't need to be directly affected by a happening to feel traumatised. Trauma is a reaction to an event, not the incident itself.

Jo Baranek said: "Children perceiving threats to their safety, or that of the people close to them after something like a terrorist attack, can be common.

"The body's primitive defence mechanisms can be activated leading children to have difficulty regulating their behaviours and emotions. They might be clingy, fearful and frightened. They could be impulsive or aggressive. They might experience difficulty sleeping, slip back in their developmental skills or show regression in their behaviour."

Seeing or hearing about frightening things in the news, of course, is just one potential source of trauma. Others include abuse, the death or serious illness or injury of a loved one, natural disaster, war, or displacement.

The following tips from NDNA could be helpful in any such situation:

- Be honest
- Maintain a routine - consistency helps children feel safe and secure
- Empower children to think about what might help, depending on age/stage of development, to allow them to feel in control
- Don't brush off their fears - talk to them and listen to their concerns
- Get them to think about why they feel a certain way - it helps them to put their fears in perspective
- Younger children will pick up on stress and fear but won't be able to make sense of these as much as older children. Try and work with parents to help them minimise what they see or hear in the press and media
- Sit with older children and support them if they have questions
- If they are older, ask them to think about a difficult time in the past that they came through. For younger children, use emotion boards to ask them how they are feeling. Share your emotions too.
- Watch out for changes in behaviour e.g. knocking down bricks, hitting toys etc. Observing and joining in with their play will help you understand their feelings and how to support them.

Have you planned for if an incident happened?

Having plans that would ensure as far as possible the health, safety and welfare of children in the face of a serious incident is crucial for all nurseries.

A terrorist attack is just one of a myriad of events that could strike, such as fire, flood, burglary or robbery.

How will you raise the alarm? Evacuate your premises? Contact parents? Is there a safe place you could take children to?

NDNA Quality Manager, Laura Robshaw, said: "It's of paramount importance that a nursery can operate effectively in the case of a critical incident, that staff stay calm and know what to do. Paediatric first aid training, of course, links in with incident planning.

"Exemplary nurseries will think through possible scenarios and even role play them as part of staff training. It's also crucial that everyone knows what your policy is and where to find it."

MEMBERS' RESOURCES

NDNA has a factsheet, 'Traumatic Situations: Support you can provide' free to members at www.ndna.org.uk/shop

A template Critical Incident policy available from NDNA includes pointers for possible procedures in the event of a bomb threat or terrorist attack

NDNA also offers a half-day course, Supporting Children through Traumatic Situations. A new online course about Prevent Duty, British Values and Extremism is now being developed by NDNA and will be available later this year.

CASE STUDY

NDNA's Scotland National Chair, Ann McEwan, recalls June 2, 2010, when her two nurseries in West Cumbria locked down as gunman Derrick Bird shot and killed 12 people before killing himself, and injured 11 others.



The first we knew was when our manager was outside with the children in the morning. At first she thought she heard a car backfiring, then quickly realised it was gunshots and ushered the children inside.

The official word from the police to lock down at both our nurseries, seven miles apart, came soon afterwards. At one building, we took the pre-schoolers upstairs 'to visit the babies' in the baby room, shutting the blinds. We had to make it seem like no one was in.

As management, we had to reassure our staff so that they were confident and capable with the children as normal. Our chef insisted that the children had to eat so went into the kitchen with a colleague and made their lunch.

The children went about their business, doing whatever they wanted to do in free play and I don't think any of them realised that anything was amiss that day, despite the closed blinds and being kept indoors.

We couldn't let parents in or children out. When finally the word came that the gunman had taken his own life and it was safe, we could open our doors. It was only then that we found out he had been metres away from us.

Afterwards, of course, even the younger children couldn't be shielded from what had happened. There wasn't anyone in the area unaffected. The next-door neighbour of one of our practitioners was killed. One parent had to walk past a body to get to nursery. The press and TV crews were there for days.

Being vigilant about any after effects among children is a form of child protection, while not forgetting to give staff time and space to talk about their own thoughts and feelings. You keep an eye out and if a child discloses something, your safeguarding training kicks in and you act upon it. It could be the next day, it could be months later.