

Consumer Handout | Canberra Health Services

Helping a child after road trauma

Children have a unique way of understanding traumatic events, depending on their age and level of maturity. Sometimes, it may look like the child is not affected. They may show how they are feeling by:

- Changes in behaviour such as temper tantrums, becoming easily upset or being clingy. Mostly in younger children.
- Playing out the loss with toys or drawing scenes of the trauma.
- Physical symptoms such as lack of appetite, poor concentration, nightmares, and pains in the body. This can be seen more in older children.

How you can help a child after road trauma

- Be honest about what happened. Children need to know the truth within their ability to understand. Tell them the correct information as calmly/sensitively as possible.
- It is okay for children to see you grieve or worry about a loved one. Children learn about grieving from the adults in their lives and they need to know it's okay to grieve.
- Tell them that any sadness you show because of the road trauma is not about them. Do not expect children to provide emotional support for you.
- Connect & Comfort: Offer cuddles and provide comfort items such as a night light if they are scared.
- It is common for children to think that injury is because of something they did and is a punishment. Tell them that it is not their fault. Repeating this over time can help.
- Tell essential people in the child's life about the road trauma so they can support them.
- Let the child know that it's okay to talk to people outside of the family about what they are feeling. Sometimes children find this easier.
- Keep your usual routines and expectations, such as bedtime and school activities.
- Encourage them to play. Children need to be able to continue being children.
- Children may experience some frightening medical procedures after the accident. It is important to be there for them if they are experiencing trauma from the accident and experiencing painful medical/surgical procedures. They may be revisiting the hospital they were taken after the accident. This can be re-traumatising.
- Ask open ended questions about how they are feeling, not closed questions
- Limit media. Shield them from graphic news report, or on-line discussions about the crash.

How you can help a child after road trauma if someone has died

- Use direct words when talking about death and/or the major trauma. For example, you could say the person 'has died' or 'was killed' rather than 'is gone'. Otherwise, a child may think the person will wake or return. Give basic facts and provide answers when asked.
- Help them to remember and connect with the person who has died. Talk about good memories.
- Read a children's book about death together, then honestly answer any questions in an age-appropriate way. There are many picture books about death to choose from
- Understand the child's developmental age so you can have helpful conversations about death and answer any questions. A child may have questions about death and their own death, such as wondering where they go, if it is painful, when the next death will happen and blaming themselves. This kind of wondering is typically around school aged children.
- As time passes, they may ask different questions and have new feelings about the event. They will usually "reprocess" or feel deeper levels of loss as they get older. You should know that this is normal.
- If your child feels anxiety about getting in a car, refer to the factsheet on 'Driving Anxiety after Road Trauma' support the child to think of small manageable steps so they can work towards being comfortable getting in a car.

Getting help

You should seek help if you are worried about how your child is coping. Some symptoms may not present themselves right away. It is important not to wait and hope things improve with time. Signs include:

- grief behaviours that last more than a few months
- long-term physical symptoms and long-term car anxiety
- self-harm, thinking or talking about suicide, or harming others
- other signs of ongoing distress— like no longer caring about anything, no energy for activities, withdrawal, or crying often.

Support services

- ACT Trauma Service - (02) 5124 3293 ACTTraumaService@act.gov.au
- The Canberra Hospital Social Work – (02) 5124 2316 acthealthsocialwork@act.gov.au
- Grief Australia - 1800 642 066 grief.org.au/
- Beyond Blue - (03) 9810 6100 beyondblue.org.au/ <tel://0398106100/>
- Australian Childhood Trauma Group - 1300 034 503 <https://theactgroup.com.au/>
- Reach Out - au.reachout.com/
- Lifeline – 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au/
- Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800 kidshelpline.com.au



For more information scan the QR code or go to:

<https://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/resources/health-information-sheets-search?collection=actssict%7Esp-information-sheet-finder&query=&f.Categories%7Ccategories=Emergency+and+trauma>



Road Trauma Support WA, Injury Matters 2024, adapted by Canberra Health Services with permission



Acknowledgement of Country

Canberra Health Services acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognises any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution to the life of this region.



© Australian Capital Territory, Canberra 2026



Accessibility call (02) 5124 0000



Interpreter call 131 450

[canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/accessibility](https://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/accessibility)

