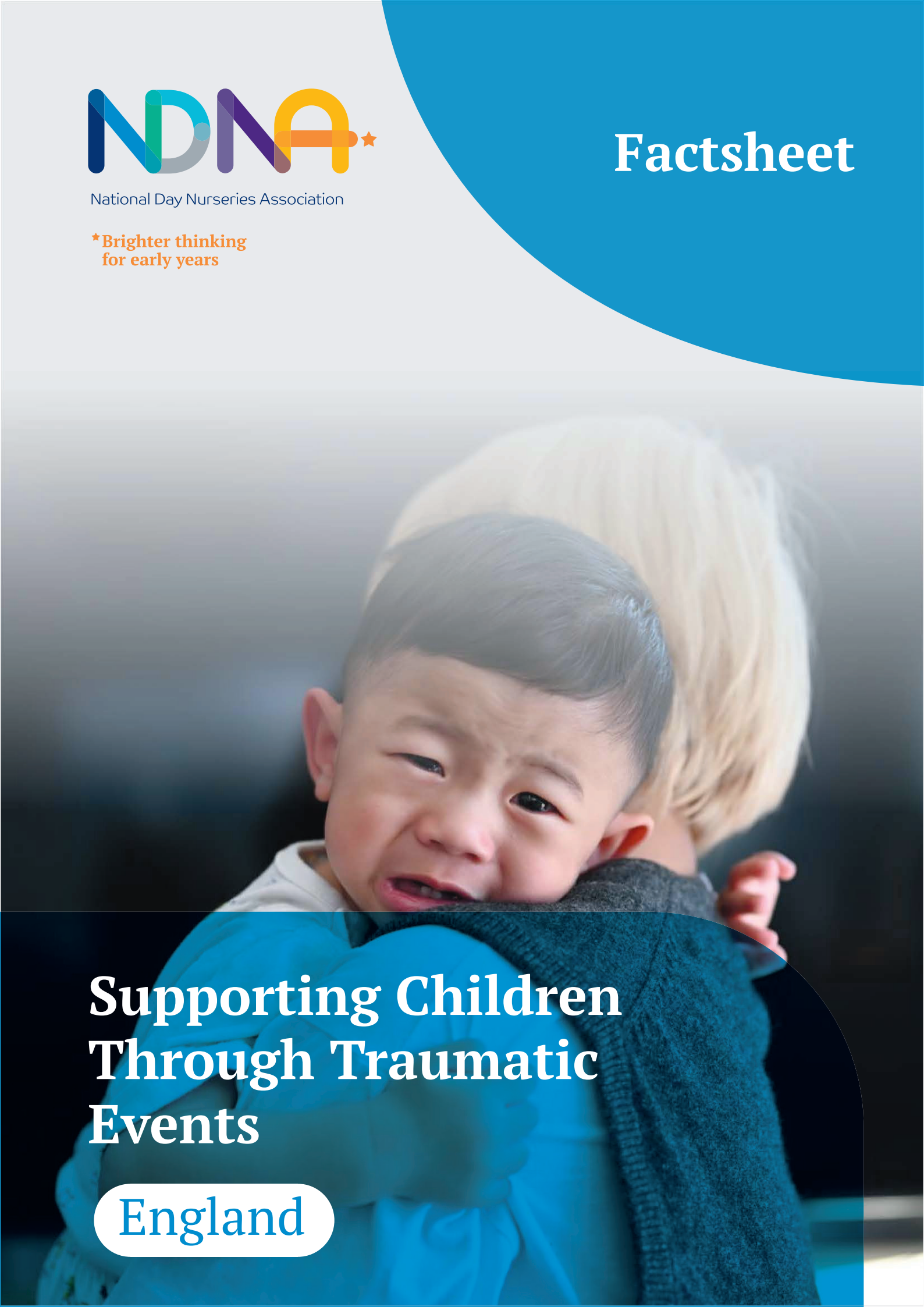




National Day Nurseries Association

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Factsheet

A photograph of a young child with dark hair crying while being held by an adult with blonde hair. The child is wearing a white shirt and the adult is wearing a dark green sweater. The background is blurred.

Supporting Children Through Traumatic Events

England

Supporting Children Through Traumatic Events

The National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) describes a traumatic event as:

“A frightening, dangerous or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic. This is particularly important for young children as their sense of safety depends on the perceived safety of their attachment figures.”

As early years professionals, we should always get to know each individual child and family in your setting and build trusting relationships so that they feel confident to share any worries and concerns they may have. When children or families are going through traumatic events, early years professionals can be a huge support in helping children to understand and process their experiences. This factsheet will look at how practitioners can support children and share some advice and guidance from specialist organisations.

Trauma is not the event experienced by a child itself but the reaction to the event and the symptoms or behaviours the child may then manifest. It is usually an external event that has been an actual or perceived threat to the life or personal integrity of the child or those close to them. A traumatic reaction is one where the body’s primitive defence mechanisms are activated. This means that what is traumatic for one child may not be for another.

Types of trauma or post-traumatic stress

There are several experiences or events that may lead to a child suffering from trauma or post-traumatic stress.

Here are some to consider:

- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse to the child or their attachment figure
- Death or serious injury of a parent or sibling
- Misplacement or refugee
- Natural disaster
- War or extreme violence
- Acts of terrorism
- Illness
- Access to inappropriate television, online content or literature
- Transition
- Military family-related stressors e.g. deployment, parental loss or injury.

Symptoms and behaviours associated with exposure to trauma

Children suffering from traumatic stress symptoms generally have difficulty regulating their behaviours and emotions. They may be clingy and fearful of new situations, easily frightened, difficult to console, be impulsive or aggressive. They may also have difficulty sleeping, lose recently acquired developmental skills and show regression in functioning and behaviour.

Possible reactions of children aged between birth to eight years following exposure to traumatic stress

Cognitive

- Risk of development delay in communication and language development
- Memory problems
- Difficulty focusing or a short attention span
- Displays signs of a special educational need or disability.

Behavioural

- Frequently distressed
- Demands attention through both positive and negative behaviours
- Exhibits regressive behaviours e.g. thumb sucking, baby talk, toilet accidents when previously fully toilet trained
- Cries or screams excessively
- Imitates the traumatic event
- Verbally abusive
- Easily startled
- Lack of trust or the ability to form relationships and/or make friends
- Separation anxiety and/or fear of being left by parent or carer
- Withdrawn
- Possessive of toys or property, unwilling to share (over and above typical stage of development regarding sharing)
- Lack of self-confidence or self-esteem.

Physiological

- Poor appetite, low weight and/or digestive problems
- Sleep difficulties, nightmares
- Toileting delay, regression in this area
- Lack of empathy for others

Unable to express emotions.

Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Strategies children may develop

Children who have experienced trauma or post-traumatic stress may have developed a range of strategies to enable them to get through each day. These behaviours may include:

- Needing frequent reassurance from their key person
- Being indiscriminately affectionate with strangers
- Poor peer relationships
- Avoiding eye contact
- Asking persistent questions or incessant chatter
- Telling lies or stealing.

Supporting children in dealing with death

Dealing with death is difficult enough for adults, let alone children, and it is natural that as caring, responsible adults we want to protect children from pain. However, to help children understand and deal with grief it is very important that we ensure children have a clear understanding of what has happened to someone special to them (in accordance with their age and stage of development). Whether they have lost someone suddenly, for example, through a tragic accident, or after a long period of critical illness, children are usually less concerned with how a person died and more with the fact that their loved one has gone.

Children often deal with death differently to adults, showing distress one minute and appearing to be disinterested in another. This is normal and does not indicate that they do not care. Grief is a normal process and each child's bereavement journey will be unique to themselves. Although it can feel a bit overwhelming for practitioners to know how to support a bereaved child, there are plenty of agencies to help support with simple, practical strategies. Just being there for the child and listening to them can make a real difference.

Often losing a pet is a child's first experience of death and it is important that practitioners empathise with children and acknowledge their feelings. Looking at and talking about life cycles can help children to understand life and death and help them to process their own experiences.

When supporting children:

- Work closely with parents and family members
- Use words that they understand
- Talk about feelings and reassure them it's OK to feel upset, sad or cross
- Listen and give honest answers; if you don't know an answer to their questions, say you don't know
- Don't avoid talking about the person who has died; keep the lines of communication open about them.

Child Bereavement UK provide a series of short films to support families and professionals working with children:

- Telling a child that someone has died
- Supporting bereaved children under five years of age
- Supporting a bereaved autistic child
- Supporting children after a death.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people>

There may be occasions where a family may have had time to prepare for this sad event and other support services may be involved. The child will talk about this in the setting, so think about planning for these types of situations by having a library of resources that can support practitioners to deal with these difficult conversations.

Child Bereavement UK has a number of resources that can support practitioners to talk to children about what is happening pre-bereavement:

- A guide for parents of terminally ill children
- When a parent is not expected to live - supporting children: Guidance for parents, families and professionals
- When a sibling is not expected to live - supporting children.

Dealing with death in difficult circumstances

The death of someone important can cause great pain and sadness whatever the cause of death. However, families bereaved through suicide or homicide also face additional pressure of coping with the pain of a sudden and unexpected death and also dealing with the circumstances of their loved one's death. This can be very difficult for a child to process so finding the right words that are easily understood is vital to help them make sense of what has happened. Doing your best to know how to support the child, and their family, through this difficult time and have the resources and support needed to help is valuable for everyone concerned. The death may be shared in the public domain and other children and parents may have heard personal details about the circumstances. Children may have questions and want to know the truth. Being honest is important and practitioners should liaise with the parents about their approach.

Death of a pet

The loss of a pet can often be a child's first experience of death. Children under two years have little concept of death but have the feelings of sadness of missing a pet. Children under five years find it hard to understand that death is permanent and may not fully comprehend why their special friend isn't there anymore. Be honest, use words the child understands, give them time to talk about their pet and their feelings to support the child to come to terms with their loss. Provide opportunities for

children to draw pictures of their pet, make a remembrance card or add a photo of their pet to a display in your room.

Issues on the news

Children may access information or witness traumatic events via television, social media or online platforms. Children look to adults to help them make sense of the world so practitioners should help children to understand that they are in a safe place and help them understand that although scary or disturbing things happen in the world they have lots of things in place to help keep them feel safe. Talk to them about how their family and staff in the setting keep all children safe.

Support children by:

- Being honest
- Using age-appropriate language
- Maintaining routines – consistency helps children feel safe and secure
- Encouraging them to talk about their feelings and share your own feelings so they know it is OK to talk about being sad or angry etc.
- Providing opportunities to release any anger in a safe way e.g. punching a ball of dough, screaming loudly outdoors
- Empowering them to think about what might help them (depending on their age and stage of development) – this helps them to feel in control
- Talking and listening to their fears or concerns in an open and non-judgemental manner
- Helping them to think about why they feel a certain way, putting any fears into perspective
- Working with parents to avoid their children seeing or hearing negative images and stories in the press and media
- Watching out for, and supporting, any changes in behaviour.

Transitions

Transitions, changes to routines or new activities can be unsettling for a child who has never experienced security and stability or who has traumatic memories of an event and/or experience. Consider how you plan and organise the day so that routines help build a strong sense of familiarity and security. It is important to think about the times of day that could be stressful for a child and ensure you have someone able to offer additional emotional support at these times.

Here are some examples:

- Drop off and collection times
- Mealtimes
- Sleep times
- Toileting or care routines
- Outdoor play
- Change of activity and/or room areas
- Visitors, external activities.

Plan your transitions around the individual needs of each child. Work with parents to ensure children are supported in the setting and at home and decisions being made about transitions are agreed with the child's parents e.g. when it is the right time to move a child into another room.

Ensure clear information sharing between the staff team so support is offered to children consistently.

Useful links and resources

- Child Bereavement UK: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>
- Help for Heroes: <https://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/>
- Scotty's Little Soldiers – a charity dedicated to supporting children who have lost a parent while serving in the British Armed Forces: <https://www.scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk/>
- Winston's Wish – the charity for bereaved children: <https://www.winstonswish.org/>



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Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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National Early Years Enterprise Centre, Longbow Close, Huddersfield HD2 1GQ
tel: 01484 407070 fax: 01484 407060 info@ndna.org.uk www.ndna.org.uk