

How to respond to a child who has been through a traumatic experience

The announcement that four-year-old Cleo Smith was found alive and safe may have prompted many practitioners to imagine how they would respond to a similar situation.

Professor Daryl Higgins is a registered psychologist who researches public health approaches to protecting children as the director of the Institute of Child Protection Studies at Australian Catholic University (ACU). Professor Higgins says practitioners with training and expertise in working with children would likely draw on principles that respect a child's point of view, known as a child-centred approach.

This means professionals responding to children who have experienced adverse conditions use a child-focused lens and a trauma-informed response.

The child's emotional wellbeing, dignity and safety would be at the forefront of any practitioner's mind when interviewing and working with children to avoid re-traumatising the child.

This approach was not only relevant to professions with direct links to children, such as child protection case workers, social workers in a welfare role, psychologists, doctors or teachers.

"Many other professions offer support for traumatic circumstances where children are indirectly linked, for instance, police officers, paramedics, legal professionals, nurses, or faith ministers," Professor Higgins said.

"Most professionals would benefit from knowing how to talk about tough stuff with children, or what to do when a child discloses abuse, harm or fear of harm."

What does Professor Higgins recommend for practitioners who find themselves treating a child who has personally experienced a traumatic event or witnessed someone in such an event?

"Try listening to children as they talk about the feelings that are important to them," Professor Higgins said.

"Take opportunities to explore these feelings with them.

"If you find that they are not feeling safe, act on this and work with the child or young person to ensure their ongoing safety."

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at ACU has developed a toolkit with practical ideas and tools on how to support children using a child-centred approach.

The Kids Central Toolkit is based on seven principles, including:

1. Children and young people's safety and wellbeing are of primary importance
2. Children are individuals with unique needs and wishes
3. Because children are usually best supported within their family every effort should be made to assist families to support their children
4. Environments surrounding children need to be child-friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow
5. Children need to be provided with information and given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives
6. The best outcomes are often achieved in partnership with others who can assist children and families in an ongoing way

The [Keep Me Safe](#) booklet, for example, discusses the child's dignity, worth and wellbeing.

"This section has suggestions on how practitioners can hear from children about how they are feeling and to give children permission to talk about or express their feelings in a safe and non-threatening way," Professor Higgins said.

Another key element in supporting a child through trauma is to focus on what has happened to them as a person rather than what is wrong with them.

"You can help children recover from trauma by recognising the signs of trauma in children of different ages," Professor Higgins said.

"For instance, young children tend to cry, eat poorly and lose weight, and have nightmares, while older children tend to feel depressed, develop self-harming behaviours, and display risky sexual behaviour."

Considering the collaborative, national effort that contributed to the Western Australian police discovering Cleo Smith alive and well, Professor Higgins said the role of communities in creating safe spaces for children was crucial.

"Community agencies can play an important role in creating a child-safe service, planning for safety, and improving ways to give children a greater say in how they are kept safe," he said.

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