



Queensland

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF
NIPPERS, YOUTH, AND YOUNG MEMBERS (AGES 5-18)



WHEN AN INCIDENT HAPPENS, IT CAN AFFECT CHILDREN DIFFERENTLY.

Whether your child witnessed an event, helped during a rescue, or experienced a frightening situation during training or patrol, it's normal for them to have emotional or physical reactions afterwards.

This guide helps you understand what to look for and how to support your child over the coming days and weeks.

COMMON REACTIONS YOU MAY NOTICE

CHILDREN AGED 5-10 (NIPPERS)

- Staying unusually close to you
- Fear of returning to training or the beach or location of incident
- Nightmares or changes in sleep
- Tummy aches, headaches, or not wanting to eat
- Regression (bedwetting, clinginess, needing comfort items)
- Bigger emotions or crying more easily

PRE-TEENS AGED 11-13 (TRANSITION TO YOUTH)

- Worry about the incident happening again
- Irritability, frustration, or emotional outbursts
- Difficulty focusing at school or sporting activities
- Asking repeated questions
- Not wanting to participate in water activities

TEENS AGED 14-18 (YOUTH & PATROLLING MEMBERS)

- Mood changes, withdrawal, or shutting down
- Reluctance to patrol or return to the beach
- Feeling responsible, guilty, or "should have done more"
- Risk-taking behaviours
- Trouble talking about how they feel
- Physical changes: tiredness, headaches, appetite shifts



HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUR CHILD

1. REASSURE THEIR SAFETY

- "You're safe now. You and the lifesavers did what needed to be done keep everyone safe." Positive reinforcement.
- "Your feelings are normal and won't stay this big forever".
- "I'm proud of how you are handling this. Even if it's hard".
- Repeat reassurance if they ask the same questions.

2. STICK TO ROUTINES

Predictability helps them feel secure - meals, bedtime, school, and activities should stay as normal as possible. Maintaining a normal routine allows for children to process their feelings and moderate their emotions.

3. LET THEM EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS THEIR WAY

- Younger kids may draw or play.
- Older kids may talk, listen to music, or want space but still seek closeness.
- You don't need perfect answers. Listening is the most important support.

4. KEEP INFORMATION SIMPLE & HONEST

- Use calm, factual, age-appropriate explanations.
- Avoid graphic detail or blame.
- Let them know who is looking after safety now (lifesavers, water safety, patrol captains).

5. MONITOR MEDIA EXPOSURE

Repeated exposure such as videos, conversations, news can increase fear or misunderstanding and may retraumatise them.

6. SUPPORT THEM TO REMAIN REGULATED

- Young children may like to colour or hold something they treasure to feel grounded.
- Slow breathing ("breathe in for 3, out for 3").
- Name 5 things they can see (repeat if necessary).
- Walking, stretching, beach play, gentle movement.
- Calming activities (colouring, music, showers).

7. ENCOURAGE A GRADUAL RETURN TO ACTIVITIES

- Especially for teens and nippers involved in the incident.
- Let them ease back, but avoid avoiding the beach long-term, as it can increase fear.



WHEN TO SEEK EXTRA SUPPORT

Reach out for additional help if you notice any of the following for more than 2–4 weeks, or if concerns become more intense:

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES

- Ongoing nightmares or sleep issues
- Avoiding surf club, beach, or activities they normally enjoy
- Big drops in school performance
- Persistent fear, sadness, or anger
- Withdrawal from family or friends

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Headaches, stomach aches, or fatigue that persist
- Changes in appetite

SAFETY CONCERNS

- Talk about self-harm
- Risky or unsafe behaviour
- Feeling "numb" or disconnected

IF SOMETHING FEELS "NOT RIGHT," TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS AND SEEK SUPPORT SOONER.

HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILD

- Start conversations gently: "How are you feeling about what happened at the beach?"
- Use reflective listening: "It sounds like that scared you."
- Give choices:
 - "Do you want to talk about it now or later?"
 - "Do you want me to stay with you, or do something together?"

FOR TEENS:

- "What's been the hardest part about it?"
- "What would help you feel supported?"
- "You can message me, write it down or draw it if you like."

WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

Surf Life Saving Queensland Member Welfare & Peer Support (Your Club's Committee, Patrol Captain, or Member Protection teams can assist or direct you).

KIDS HELPLINE: 1800 55 1800

LIFELINE: 13 11 14

YOUR GP OR LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

SCHOOL COUNSELLOR OR GUIDANCE OFFICER

MEMBERWELFARE@LIFESAVING.COM.AU





Queensland

Surf Life Saving Queensland

07 3846 8000 • lifesaving.com.au